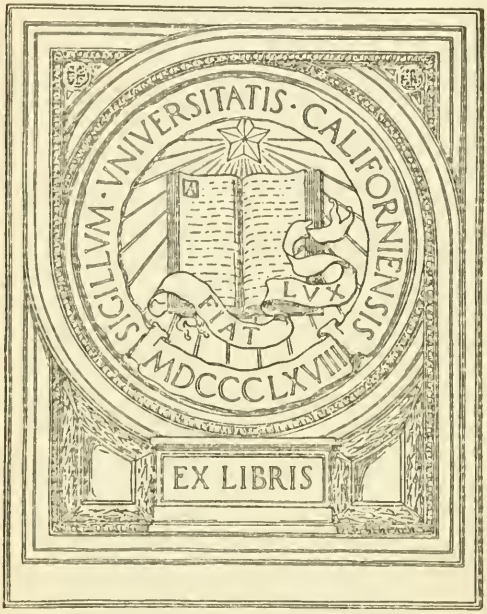
UNCLE JOHN



UNCLE JOHN.

UNCLE JOHN.

A Novel.

BY

G. J. WHYTE-MELVILLE,

AUTHOR OF

"MARKET HARBOROUGH," "THE GLADIATORS," "KATE COVENTRY,"
"SATANELLA," ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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UNCLE JOHN.

Me forthinketh, said King Pellinore, this shall betide, but God may well foredoe destiny.—*Morte d'Arthur.*

CHAPTER I.

THE LETTER-BOX.

Of all taxes levied on friendship few are so galling as the *corvée* that compels a guest to inspect and admire the house in which he is entertained. To follow your host, with wet feet, and hands in pockets, round the stables, the kennel, the farm, and, worse still, the kitchen-garden, may well create a doubt that you had better have stayed away; but this becomes a certainty when, in dismal attics and cheerless corridors, you stumble

against a coal-box or are brought up with your head in a housemaid's closet. I will not ask my reader, therefore, to accompany me beyond the hall of a comfortable country-house in one of the midland counties; a hall well warmed and ventilated, where a good fire burns opposite the glass door that looks out upon the lawn. It seems to blaze the more cheerfully that a hard frost has bound the whole country in misery and iron. The leafless hedges stand stiff and bristling with frozen rime, the bare trees in the park are clearly cut against a dull grey sky, the very grass crackles under the postman's foot, and that functionary would seem to be the only moving creature in the parish but for an inquisitive robin, in a bright red waistcoat, with his head on one side, who hops and jerks restlessly across the gravel in front of the hall-door.

In consequence of the postman's arrival, a well-dressed free-and-easy butler emerges from certain back-passages and corridors, bringing a draught of cold air with him, and proceeds to unlock the letter-box that stands

in a remote corner on one of the hall-tables As he tumbles out the contents he scrutinises their addresses with considerable attention. And here I may observe that a shrewd upper servant, who superintends the correspondence of a family, even when he confines himself to the outside of the many missives that pass through his hands, must, if, to use his own language, he "puts that and that together," know a great deal more than we give him credit for.

On the present occasion we will take upon ourselves the fulfilment of a task for which the butler has little leisure, the postman less inclination; and, mastering the contents of these epistles, begin with No. I., addressed in a running, lady-like, not very legible hand,

To the Hon. Mrs. Pike, South Kensington, London, S.W.

[No date.]

My Dearest Letty,—Not a word till I have sent a thousand kisses to Baby. He is the greatest darling in Europe, and I am sure he knew me when I wished him good-bye, in

your boudoir, the day I left London. I have not forgotten my promise to write, and tell you "all how and about it," as my maid says when she begins a full, *un*true, and particular account of that general rumpus among the servants which seems to prevail regularly once a month. In the first place, the old house is as nice as ever, the country very much the reverse. The fields at this time of year seem impracticable without stilts, the lanes are knee-deep in mud, one meets cattle at all sorts of unexpected turns, and I think I am equally frightened whether they have horns or not. The labourers touch their hats and grin, their wives make curtseys down to the ground. Every woman carries a basket; and oh! they are so dirty! Then the boys have sheep-dogs, and talk to them in such an extraordinary language; but the creatures seem to understand, nevertheless. The cottages and children are pretty. Perhaps it may be more tolerable in summer. Now for our party; small and select, just what *you* like. Uncle John is, as he always was and

always will be, a *dear* old dear; but his whiskers are whiter than when I saw him last, and he seems to have grown shorter. Between ourselves Letty (*mind!*) I cannot help fancying that Aunt Emily is wearing him out. He is as good-tempered as ever, and sometimes full of fun, but I don't suppose it can be natural for a man to be so patient under contradiction, however well he may have been broken in; and I think if he could go away somewhere, *by himself*, for a month or two, it would do him a world of good. You know him thoroughly, and love him dearly, so I need say no more, but pass on to his guests, taking them as they go in to dinner, the county people first. Uncle gives his arm to a Mrs. Foster, always; I can't think why. She has no particular rank, but is wife of the Master of the Hounds; perhaps that counts for something down here. I won't describe her, dear, I'll only describe her head. An *enormous* chignon, of so many shades that it is almost tartan, put on very high up, with odds and ends stuck all over it, like the toys on a twelfth-

cake; a bunch of artificial *vegetables*, not flowers, drooping on one side; earrings like the things they hang on a chandelier; and—spectacles! How Mr. Foster *could!* for really *he* is rather nice; oldish, and ridiculous about his hunting, but good-natured and amusing, with a frank courtesy about him, that I think men of all ranks acquire who live a great deal out-of-doors. He is wretched just now, because it is freezing hard and they can't hunt. I am sure I don't know why; any amount of cold must be preferable to the slush we have all been wading about in ever since I came down. He is quite the nicest of the gentlemen, for the young ones are rather detestable. A curate from the other side of the county, who is a wonderful cricketer, I believe, and takes long walks by himself. They say he preaches beautifully, and next Sunday we shall have an opportunity of judging; as yet I have not heard him open his lips. Also two officers from some cavalry regiment, whose figures, clothes, and voices are so ridiculously alike, and their faces so devoid of all ex-

pression, that if the best-looking of the pair had not a trifling squint, it would be impossible to know one from the other. Should the ice bear to-morrow, they propose teaching me to skate—either or both, I can't tell which. But for poor Mr. Foster and his hunting, I hope it may; and only wish you were here to enjoy the fun, as they don't the least know our *form*, to use their own expression, and that you and I can hold our own on the Round Pond with the best performers who ever danced a minuet on steel. I have not made up my mind whether to pretend I am quite a beginner, or to astonish their weak minds by dashing out at once with a figure of 8, on the outside edge, backwards.

My dear, I am coming to the end of my paper. I shall have no space left to describe the rest of the ladies, two married and one single, all plain, nor a delightful Eton boy, who goes back, I am sorry to say, to-morrow; nor to give half the messages I should like to your dear General, my partner at whist, my adversary at bézique; the only antagonist who

never made me angry, and my pattern, next to Baby, for everything that is manly and adorable; but with many kisses must remain, dearest, darling Letty,

Ever your loving,
Annie Dennison.

P.S.—I forgot to say we expect a Mr. Mortimer to-day, who has been a great traveller, and a Clerk from the Foreign Office, whose name I have not yet made out. Freezing hard; I think the ice *will* bear to-morrow.

No. II.

To Mr. Josias Potter, the Kennels, Cublington.

Plumpton Priors, Jan. 12th.

Potter,—As there appears but little chance of the weather changing, you had better not send out the appointments for next week. If there is no prospect of improvement, I shall hunt the first open day at the Kennels, and we can give the Blastonbury Woods a good

drilling with a strong pack of hounds. I have been thinking over Woldsman's doings on Saturday, and have come to the conclusion we must draft him. Wildboy too is, I fear, a conceited hound. It is a pity, for I never saw two sightlier ones on the flags. I was much pleased with Frantic and Fearless. They puzzled it out through Martin's sheep at the back of Oldborough, and were never once off the line all the way to the Dales. They promise to be as good as old Frolic herself. You had better see Mr. Boulter at once about the meal, and tell Frank to go over with the cart to Sludgeley. Martin's white horse will not keep much longer.

I have a letter from the new man at Spinnithorne complaining of the damage done to his young wheat on Thursday, and another from old Miss Lovelace about her poultry. The usual story: a fox has taken nine Dorking hens, a litter of pigs, and a peacock! As soon as the hacks are roughed, you can go over and talk to the Spinnithorne man, whose name I forget. If he is obstinate, tell him the damage,

should there be any, shall be made good when harvest comes round. Miss Lovelace will be more difficult to manage; but you might admire the silk dress I gave her last year, and hint at another, if she seems very obstinate indeed. When you are in that neighbourhood, ride round by the Lodges and see Colonel Jones's keeper; the people from Upper Preston are continually rabbiting in Preston Dene, and it is his business to keep them out. Mr. Miles tells me they found a trap that would have held a bullock in Thorpe Netherwood yesterday. I have written to Sir James on the subject; but if you see the steward, it would be well to mention it. He is a good friend to hunting and a most respectable man. I cannot think of anything more just now, except that you should call on the bailiff at Kingsacre and find out how many puppies they will walk for us. He promised me two couple at least. We shall want another cow in less than a fortnight, but that may stand over till Middleton Fair. I shall be home the day after to-morrow, when I can give

any further directions you require, and remain

Your friend,
JOHN FOSTER.

No. III.

To the Honourable Mrs. PIKE, South Kensington, London, S.W.

Plumpton Priors, Jan. 12th, 18th.

DEAR MRS. PIKE, — My husband desires me to write and say that it would give us much pleasure if General Pike and yourself would come here next week, from the 17th to the 22nd, to meet a small party of friends and neighbours. There is a midday train from London that reaches Sludgeley Station, only a mile and a half from our gate, at 4.50. You must be sure to change at Muddleford, and if the down express is late you may have to wait there; but this is better than coming by the new line and posting from Canonsbury. We can send the brougham for yourselves and the omnibus for servants and luggage. Our niece, Miss Dennison, who is staying with us,

tells me that she believes I shall be fortunate enough to find you both disengaged; and hoping for an early reply (in the affirmative), I remain

Yours very sincerely,
EMILY DENNISON.

No. IV.

To AUGUSTUS NEVILLE, Esq., Middlemarsh, Huntingdon.

Jan. 11*th or* 13*th.*

MY DEAR PODGE,—You swore you would write once a week all the holidays through, and so did I; but you haven't, and I haven't. Never mind. Better late than never: old proverb—neither Solomon's nor Tupper's. I must tip you a line from here because I go home to-morrow, and there is very little time for writing or anything else in our diggings at this season, when the governor likes to have a houseful. He is going to finish off the pheasants next week, and I made him *almost* promise that I might shoot with the others. I *have* got a gun, a very good one. If it

wasn't for that I should be quite sorry to leave this place. It is very jolly, particularly in the evenings; for old Dennison, who is no end of a trump, always has the billiard-room lit up after dinner; so if you don't want to be bothered with the ladies, you needn't go to them all.

I generally play with Miss Dennison; such a stunning girl—a good deal older than me, of course—but I can give her ten in a hundred up; and I play much better on this table than I did that day at your governor's in London. She sings, too, no end, the jolliest songs, that make a fellow feel quite in the dumps, but always English. She has a very fine voice though, and Lexley, a tall chap, who is staying here, a curate, with black whiskers, is rather spoony on her. He was not an Eton fellow, but played two years ago at Lord's in the Marylebone eleven. I don't think he likes us to be so much in the billiard-room, but he is an awful muff with a cue. I have got such a good hunter this Christmas; not a pony, but quite fifteen hands. Can't

he just jump! Only he pulls rather hard; but I don't mind that; and I am to have top-boots next year. I suppose I shan't see you now till next half, though my governor told me to ask you to come to us, if you could, on your way back to Eton. I wish you would. I want to show you the terrier pups and Bellerophon — that's my new horse. When he gets quieter I will give you a mount on him. Won't it be jolly if we travel together? Good-bye.

Yours very sincerely,
H. G. F. PERIGORD
(commonly called the Pieman).

No. V.

To HORACE MAXWELL, Esq., Foreign Office, Whitehall, S.W.

Plumpton Priors, Jan. 12th.

MY DEAR HORACE, — You have delayed your visit here so long that I fear I shall be gone before you arrive. I take the duty next Sunday, but must return home early Monday morning. I have no idea what

happens to foreign treaties and ambassadors' notes when you neglect them, but a parish gets sadly out of order if it is left to itself for ten days. I have still a hope that you may come to-morrow, particularly as you will receive another reminder from our excellent host, who said at breakfast he had written a strong letter this morning, and I wish it may be possible for you to give me a couple of days at least before you return. I need not say what a hearty welcome would await you, though, alas! I have only bachelor accommodation to offer. There are many temptations to visit this most agreeable house, and many more to remain in it when you come. Mr. Dennison himself is my ideal of a country gentleman, and his wife, though not so taking at first sight, improves on acquaintance.

There is no lack of amusement; hunting and shooting, for those who like such sports, beautiful walks, even at this time of year, out-of-doors, and an excellent billiard-table within. One of the young ladies, a Miss Dennison, plays remarkably well, and has

already taken the conceit out of an Eton boy who is spending part of his holidays here, and who thinks no small beer of himself, as we used to say at Rugby. I am sure the Etonians are more "cheeky," to use another slang expression, than our *condiscipuli;* still, the school turns out some excellent classics, and the Shooting Fields make good cricketers, no doubt. This youth is a manly fellow enough, but I should imagine rather a dunce at his books. Miss Dennison, who is very clever, quizzes him unmercifully, but the young cub has not an atom of shyness, and, indeed, is usually ready with a reply. It is very difficult to describe a lady or a landscape, so much in both depends on lights and colouring; moreover, it would be a waste of time to detail Miss Dennison's personal attractions, as you will be able to judge for yourself when you arrive. I shall be much disappointed if you do not admire her. There is a peculiar depth and softness in her eyes when she turns them on you that almost makes one a believer in mesmerism, and with a delicate fair face and

masses of rich brown hair, that would be black but for a tinge of gold, she brings forcibly before me my ideal of female loveliness. You need not laugh. It is only a picture I saw the year before last at Vienna. Her figure, too, and all her movements, are full of grace and dignity. To see her walk across the room is to see—no! I will not descend into descriptions that could never convey the faintest notion of their subject. Rather will I quote the terse and glowing phrases in which Captains Nokes and Stokes, the great twin brethren of the —th Dragoons, expressed their approval only this morning in the conservatory.

Quoth Stokes to Nokes, sucking viciously at a refractory cigar, "Good looks, good temper, good manners—what would you have more? and the sweetest goer I've seen over rough and smooth since Witch of Erin won the Conynghame Cup."

Answered Nokes to Stokes, "I'm not a buyer, old fellow, more's the pity! or she'd suit me down to the ground."

Yet these men are not entirely without cultivation and refinement. One of them sketches admirably in water-colours, and, passing through the library, I came upon the other reading Tasso in the original, apparently with the greatest zest. Why should they talk in such terms of a lady to whom they hourly offer a perfectly chivalrous and unselfish politeness? I like them both, nevertheless. We took a long walk together yesterday that reminded me of old University days. Of course I love and revere my own profession above all others; but were I not a parson, my dear Horace, I trust there is no harm in confessing that I should like to have been a soldier. Do not think for a moment I am discontented with my lot; the obscurest country curate has a field for the exercise of all the best and noblest qualities of manhood. Were my powers increased a hundredfold, they would still fall far short of my requirements. I may have my wishes, who has not? The *angulus ille* with me, would probably be such preferment as should enable me to make for

myself a home. Have I seen one whom I should like to instal as its mistress? Again, who knows? Probably, the real mistress, when she does come, will be very different from the imaginary one.

And now I have let this letter run to an unconscionable length, yet feel as if I had not said half I wish. I will inflict on you the balance when we meet, and in the meantime remain as ever,

Yours most truly,

ALGERNON LEXLEY.

No. VI.

To Major-General J. PIKE, etc., South Kensington, London, S.W.

Plumpton Priors, Jan. 12th.

My dear Jacob,—My wife has written to yours by to-day's post, with a *formal* invitation to you both. I write to *you*, as usual, because I want you to do something for me. In the first place, of course you must come here. That question can admit neither of doubt nor argument. If you have other engagements

throw them over; if pleasures, postpone; if duties, neglect them: here you are bound to be on the 17th at latest. I have kept Marbury Hill on purpose, and my keeper says he has twice as many pheasants in the lower wood as when we shot it last year. That ought to be good enough. If you can hold as straight as you did then, I can promise you a hundred to your own gun. I have been out very little, the incurable complaint of *anno domini* is beginning to tell, and though I have few bodily ailments, and am still pretty strong and active, that moral energy, which is the backbone of all exertion, fails day by day.

That will never be the case with *you*. They say, though I don't believe it, a man must die either of *syncope* or *asphyxia*—by fainting or suffocation. In the same way, age as it steals on makes us year by year more fussy or more torpid. How much better to be the stream that keeps itself pure by ceaselessly dashing and boiling against a rock, than the green slimy pond, never ruffled by a breath, but stagnating calmly and helplessly

into mud! You are the youngest of all our contemporaries. Long may you remain so!

And yet, my dear old friend, it does not seem so many years ago (can it be more than fifty?) since we won the Double Sculling Sweepstakes, amidst the shouts of my tutor's levy, at the Brocas Clump. I remember, and so do you, as if it had happened yesterday, how we pounded a Leicestershire field at the second fence from the Coplow; and yet I doubt if one of those we left behind us is alive now. "Where is the life that late I led?" and where, oh! where are the loves we loved, the sums we squandered, the horses we tired, and the scores of good fellows we have seen out?

"There's many a lad I loved is dead,
And many a lass grown old
And while the lesson strikes my head
My weary heart grows cold.

But wine awhile staves off despair,
Nor lets a thought remain;
And that I think 's a reason fair
To fill my glass again."

If we live to a hundred, should we ever

forget how poor Frank used to troll out Morris's famous drinking song after mess? Alas! if he could have resisted the filling (and emptying) of his own glass so persistently, we should have had him with us still.

I sometimes wished that I had remained in the service, as you did, and married later in life. But I suppose these things are arranged for us, and that every station has its drawbacks —every horse is handicapped to carry a weight proportioned to his merits. As old Drill-sergeant Macpherson used to say to the recruits, "It's not all beer and skittles when you've taken her Majesty's shilling." And I fancy none of those over whom he domineered were inclined to dispute so obvious a truism.

Now to detail the commissions I want executed in London. In the first place, will you go to Lincoln's Inn, any day this week, and jog everybody's memory concerning our trustee business? They seem to have forgotten that another quarter's interest will be due on the 25th. Also look in at Meerschaum's and try if you can get me some more of those

large cigars we liked in Scotland. I will take any number of boxes—say a dozen—if they are the right sort; but I will not have short ones. I smoke very little, as you know, but like that little long.

You are sure to be at Tattersall's, so it will be no trouble to look at Mountjoy's horses. He has a chestnut that I am told would carry me. You know exactly what I want—something very perfect, with good manners and easy to ride; a rough-actioned horse tires me to death. He *must* be a fine jumper, as I like occasionally to mount a friend, and do not wish him to be brought home with a broken neck—at least, as old Bitterly said, "not to *my* house." A chestnut horse they call Magnate bears the character of an excellent hunter. I will ask you to have him out and look him well over; if you like his make and shape, you can bid for him up to whatever you think he is worth. I should not mind three hundred; but you must be very careful for when you come here you will have to ride him yourself.

I *know* you will like some claret I have just imported—Leoville '64—that will never get any better, and ought to be drunk out now. I *think* too you will like the little party staying here. Foster, I fear, will be gone; it is impossible to keep him more than two days from his hounds and his kennel. He makes a good master, and they have promised him a fair subscription. Potter does pretty well; he is an excellent servant, as I told them all they would find him—very patient in the field, very persevering, and lets his hounds alone; *but he does not get quick after his fox.* He never spoils a run and never makes one. I hunt so little now that, of course, I do not say much, but let them find out for themselves. You and I once thought every huntsman heaven-born, every fence practicable, every fox forward, and every hound right. I am not sure but that the enjoyment was greater in those days and the disappointment less.

Two pleasant dragoons of the old plunging pattern will remain till Returns, at the end of the month; they are good fellows enough—

ride and shoot straight, make themselves extremely agreeable in the drawing-room, and entertain the profoundest respect for a major-general, which I hope you will do nothing to lessen. I expect Percy Mortimer to-day (from the Fejee Islands, I believe), and Horace Maxwell, from the Foreign Office, both very hungry for shooting. But never fear, not a stick shall be moved in Marbury till you come. My niece Annie is here, and looking forward with great delight to your visit. I do not know on what principle she has appropriated you, but she always speaks of you as *her* General. Tell Mrs. Pike, with our kindest regards, that I will never forgive her if she does not bring *the* baby. There is a steady old rocking-horse still eating his head off under the stairs; I wish you would both stay till your son is old enough to ride him.

And now, my dear fellow, hoping to see you very soon,

I remain, yours as ever,

JOHN DENNISON.

No. VII.

To Percy Mortimer, Esq., Travellers' Club, Pall Mall, London, S.W.

Dear Percy,—Not having seen or heard anything of you since we parted at Meerut, it *did* knock the wind out of me more than a bit to be told you were expected here this week. I can only hope the tip is a straight one. Come by all means if you *can*. The crib is craftily constructed, warm, water-tight, and with capacious cellarage. The bedrooms are easy of access, and the stairs made on purpose for after-dinner transport. The host is a trump, his cook so-so, but happily not too ambitious, and his liquors simply undeniable. A geological party, by name Lexley, who is getting his health with the rest of us, says it is a clay soil, with a sub-something of something else. Being a scientific cove, you shall argue the point with him when you come. To me it seems a surface of hard frost, with a swamp underneath, that will make the country unrideable when it thaws. In the meantime we

are getting the skates ready, and I—even I—am coming out as "quite the ladies' man." I am to instruct Miss Dennison to-morrow in the graceful art, and can only hope she may take her croppers good-humouredly; for, as Pat Conolly used to say, "it's a mighty slippery hold ye get of the water when ye lay iron to ice." I shall do my best to keep her head straight, for you don't often meet them of that stamp. I'm a bad hand at describing a woman, but I'll be bound you haven't seen such a shaped one in all the Feejee Islands—and I give you the tattooing in. As to her being pretty and all that, it seems a matter of course; but she has a way of looking round at a poor fellow that makes him feel very glad he's a bachelor, yet very unwilling to remain one. Besides, from what Mrs. Dennison let out, she stands a good chance of having a pot of money when some old buffer dies, and he's past seventy now. Mrs. D. speaks by the card, I fancy; I know I shouldn't like to contradict her, and I am sure Dennison wouldn't. I should say she

wants her head at her fences, and would make it very uncomfortable for him if he didn't mind what he was about. You must say "Yes" to *her* if you wish to sail on an even keel in this house; and Nokes, who isn't easily dashed, is obliged to behave quite prettily when she's got her eye on him. The niece seems the only person who isn't afraid of her, and I take it there's some hard hitting when they *do* have a turn-up. I don't understand women, having had very few dealings with them, for which I can't be too thankful; but it does seem to me that it takes a woman to tackle a woman, and you can't do better than let them fight it out. Miss Dennison looks a good-tempered girl too, but no doubt she has lots of pluck.

The shooting is fair, considering it's a hunting country, and Uncle John, as everybody calls our host, is very absolute on the subject of pheasants and foxes. He insists on having the latter, and when he has established that point, he says, he finds no difficulty about the other. It is the only subject on

which I have yet heard him hold forth, for he is by no means a noisy one—would rather listen than speak and rather smoke than do either. Nokes, who is also a nailer at holding his tongue, swears by him, of course.

I meant to tell you about the country and the hunting, and all that, in case you should bring any horses; but in this weather shooting and skating irons are the necessary outfit. So I will only add, come if you can; if not, scrape me off one line to say where I am to draw for you in the village on my way to headquarters.

Yours very truly,

ANTHONY STOKES.

To the HALL PORTER, Army and Navy Club, S.W.

Jan. 12*th.*

Please forward my letters. Address, "Plumpton Priors, Middleton Lacy," till further orders, instead of putting them in the fire as usual.

JAMES NOKES.

If people's characters are to be guessed from their handwriting, we may fairly suppose that their actual correspondence will afford us something more certain than mere surmise as to their habits, tempers, tastes, and dispositions. It is for this reason we have taken such unwarrantable liberties with the letter-box at Plumpton Priors.

CHAPTER II.

FIVE O'CLOCK TEA.

"This is one of our noblest institutions, Captain Nokes. I see you never miss it."

The Captain, gorgeously attired in yellow knickerbockers and purple hose, looked round to assure himself that Stokes was "in support." Encouraged by the presence of his comrade, similarly attired, he charged boldly up to the tea-table at which Miss Dennison had taken her seat.

"Nothing fetches a fellow like a cup of tea at this time of day, and a cigar afterwards." The Captain made a sudden pull-up, as if fearful of having committed a solecism,

adding somewhat inconsequently, "Of course, if there are ladies and that, you know, one don't want to smoke, you know. A man can't have everything."

"You're quite a philosopher," replied Miss Dennison, with one of her brightest smiles, as she filled the cups. "But don't you always have tea in your barracks? I've heard a great deal about the evening meal. I know what 'telling off' is, and a kit, and a canteen. I'm rather a military person, you observe. I confess I *do* like soldiers, Captain Nokes!"

Honest Nokes, than whom no man alive had better nerve to confront a swift bowler or an awkward fence, looked seriously alarmed at this frank avowal, withdrawing his chair at least a couple of feet from so dangerous a neighbourbood His comrade, however, came opportunely to the rescue.

"*And* officers, Miss Dennison," added Stokes, with a glance from his best eye.

"Not unless they are generals," returned the young lady. "You see I've got a general of my own. A *major*-general. At least he

belongs to a great friend of mine. He is to be here next week."

"Who's to be here next week?" demanded the sharp clear tones of Mrs. Dennison, from her knitting at the other end of the room. "What are you talking about, Annie?"

"Only the Pikes, aunt," replied Miss Dennison. "Uncle told me he had asked them himself."

"Your uncle did not ask them himself, at least to *my* knowledge," retorted the other severely. "I should think even Mr. Dennison would hardly ignore his wife so completely. I believe it is usual for such invitations to originate with the lady of the house, and I have not yet quite forfeited my claim to that position; so you shouldn't state a fact that you are unable to substantiate."

Annie looked uncomfortable, and one of those irksome silences supervened which everybody longs to break, while nobody can think of anything to say.

Mrs. Dennison had quick ears. Is it possible that she heard her husband hunting

for a newspaper in the library adjoining, and spoke for his edification? Nokes coloured, Stokes winked, and Mr. Lexley, gulping a mouthful of hot tea, raised such a blister on his tongue as endangered the utility of that organ for next Sunday's sermon.

The entrance of young Perigord, bright and flushed from the crisp outward air, was felt to be a relief by all.

"You should have stayed till the moon rose," exclaimed the Etonian, throwing himself into a chair, and commencing a voracious attack on the bread-and-butter. "It's so jolly skating by moonlight. And I say, Miss Dennison, I did such a stunning spread-eagle after you left. Do you think if I was to practise every day, I should be good enough for the Round Pond? How I wish I wasn't going away to-morrow!"

"We shall miss you very much," answered the young lady. "You certainly keep us all alive down here. Pray do they teach skating at Eton, as they do swimming"—she paused for a moment—"and slang?"

The boy laughed. "You're always chaffing a fellow," was his reply, "but I like to be chaffed by *you.* (Yes, please, another cup and a slice of the cake.) I say, wasn't it fun to see you strike out from the chair, when Captain Nokes thought you meant going a header, and cut a figure of 8 without lifting your heel from the ice? Why you skate like —like—like bricks! I wish I was only half as steady, I'd belong to the Skating Club to-morrow."

"You astonished us all," said Mr. Lexley, putting down his empty cup. "I confess I was a little alarmed till I saw how thoroughly you were mistress of your feet. A slip on the ice is very dangerous, Miss Dennison," added the divine, with a soft look and something approaching to a blush.

She laughed merrily, while Stokes, remembering a French proverb bearing on the subject, refrained with difficulty from quoting it then and there.

"I have skated ever since I was ten," said Annie. "I liked it much better than my

lessons, and learned the outside edge a good deal quicker than the 'History of England.' It's not half so difficult as people think!"

"Not for ladies," interposed Stokes, who felt he was coming out. "They do anything that requires 'knack' far better than men. Why in a dozen lessons you may teach them to ride, and a dragoon can't learn under two years."

"It's only because they ride with longer reins than we do," observed Nokes.

"Don't you think they have more delicacy of touch, and therefore a lighter hand on the bridle!" asked Lexley.

"They've always got the easiest horse in the stable, and he's galloped before they get on, at least that is my sister's dodge," said young Perigord.

"We have more patience than you have, and more tact," replied Annie, with a mischievous glance; "qualities that subdue the inferior nature of the enemy."

"More obstinacy, you mean, and more cunning," was Aunt Emily's amendment, in

her harshest tones, as she swept by the tea-table for some worsted, "The nobler the animal the easier it is to deceive. That's the secret of many a woman's success in matters of far greater importance than riding out of one field into another."

"Bravo, Mrs. D!" exclaimed the incorrigible Etonian. "Five to two the best of *that* round, I think. Now *my* experience of women, is that they do everything well they really like, and you can't tire them, even the delicate ones, with any amount of larks, in the shape of picnics, croquet, archery, tea-parties, meets of hounds, dancing, driving, and racketing about; but they're soon beat if you keep them at home, with the blinds down on a wet day."

A general laugh, aroused by the gravity with which this young gentleman expressed his sentiments, brought Mr. Dennison into the room, and a place was immediately cleared for "Uncle John" at the tea-table, while his wife, looking austerely in the face of her youthful guest with the intention of adminis-

tering some cutting rebuke on his flippancy, could not forbear a smile, as he winked solemnly, stuffed a large piece of cake in his mouth, and made a face like the clown in a pantomime—an accomplishment to which he devoted much of his leisure and of which he was exceedingly proud.

Aunt Emily's ill-humour was not proof against the boy's exuberant spirits and intense enjoyment of life. Though he provoked her, worried her, broke through her rules and made light of her ordinances, she could not find it in her heart to reprove him as she felt he deserved, and for no member of the establishment, from its head downwards, was she half so forbearing as for this young scapegrace, who offended and amused her alternately every hour of the day.

Half a century ago, when John Dennison married her, Miss Emily Bland was as fresh, florid, and joyous-looking a girl as you would see at rural flower show or county races. She had plenty of partners, was never without an admirer to carry her shawl at a picnic, or

string her bow at an archery meeting; but, somehow, partners and admirers did not get beyond waltzing and admiration; there was something feminine wanting in the straightforward, outspoken young lady, that a cleverer woman would have supplied with affectation. A far less amiable person might have been more beloved, if only for the little airs and graces that, however transparent, seem so appropriate to the softer sex. Nobody went home haunted by Emily Bland's eyes, with Emily Bland's voice ringing in his ears, and a flower from Emily Bland's bouquet to place in water on his dressing-table. There is a magic in most women, if only exercised on the right subject, that seems quite independent of personal beauty or mental advantages; a charm that, in his mind who has come under the spell, connects her with all the comeliness, the excitement, and the interest of his life. He feels it in every kind of incongruous object and situation: in the violets that scent a woodland solitude, the patchouli that floats about a crowded opera box, in the carol of a

thrush on a spring morning, and the wail of a German waltz pealing at midnight, so sweet, so sad, so dear, because of the dancers who have departed and the days that are dead. In the glow of success, or the consciousness that he has borne him gallantly under defeat—in the strain of study and the pleasant merriment of relaxation—in the river, the sky, the woods, the downs, the sunlight on his brow and the free fresh turf beneath his feet—in the chime of bells, the voices of children, the loving welcome of his dog, the solemn glances of his favourite horse—in all and everything that constitute his identity, she has her share ; so, finding she pervades his heart, he determines that, without her, existence is a blank, and takes her to himself, to discover, alas ! too often, that, as a wife, she pervades it no more. Then come disappointment, discontent, recrimination, implied if not expressed. Human nature, in spite of experience, opining that life should be a path of flowers, feels ill used. The man suspects he was a fool, the woman considers herself a martyr ; by the time each

is reconciled to the inevitable years have passed away, and the moment has come to say "Good-bye." Perhaps not till lies between them the mysterious gulf, so narrow yet so impassable, that we call the grave, does either really know how loving was the other, and how beloved.

But Emily Bland had her romance too, a romance laid by in that secret storehouse where we put away our relics, and seem to hoard them the more religiously the more worn and useless they have become,

> "And the name of the isle is the Long Ago,
> And we bury our treasures there:"

but ever and anon the mists clear away from the island, and it stands out bright and shining, as if but an hour's sail from our bark, while the treasures flash and sparkle as of yore, because for one dreamy moment we can forget that

> "The brows of beauty and bosoms of snow
> Are heaps of dust, though we loved them so!"

and that the cold night of reality will fall on

us darker and drearier for that delusive flash, half memory, half fancy, which it may be, after all, is a soul's foresight of the coming dawn that shall bring eternal day.

Emily Bland's romance, however, she kept to herself, and when John Dennison, young, amiable, full of life, spirits, and a certain genial softness of manner, attractive to men as to women, made his appearance at her father's house, and paid her the usual attentions of such guests to their hosts' daughter, she was not disinclined to hear his praises from maiden aunts and married chaperons, who held that the first qualification for a husband was a large landed estate, while, if that estate was unincumbered, and the man seemed good-natured, well-principled, and agreeable in manner, why so much the better.

All these requirements John Dennison amply fulfilled, and, if his old schoolfellows and brother officers were to be believed, a kinder heart, a more amiable disposition, were never lodged in twelve stone of symmetry and good looks. Many women would

have loved him dearly, perhaps many did. If not "boisterous as March," he was at least "fresh as May," and could identify himself with their interests, amusements, likes and dislikes, in a pleasant off-hand way, especially gratifying to that sex which pardons every offence more readily than neglect.

So he fell in love with Emily Bland as a young good-humoured country squire, who has sold out of his regiment and is on the look-out for a wife, seems prone to fall in love—easily, painlessly, without those self-depreciating misgivings that render the cold fits of this intermittent malady so uncomfortable. His attachment neither kept him awake nor took away his appetite, did not even provoke him to write poetry, nor smoke inordinately, nor depart in any way from the usual habits of active indolence that a landed proprietor with a good agent almost necessarily adopts. If he rode a turn harder with the hounds I do not think it was owing to Miss Bland's presence in an open carriage at the meet; and when he got his famous score of three

figures off the round-hand bowling, which was then a new art, I happen to know Miss Bland was on a visit to her aunt a hundred miles away, and did not even look in the county paper for its flowery account of the match.

So they were married ; and it is only fair to say that it took them many weeks to discover they were utterly unsuited, had but few interests and no ideas in common. What may have been Miss Bland's ideal of a bridegroom this is not the place to inquire ; but it was apparently something very different from kindly, clear-faced, open-hearted John Dennison. She took no pains to conceal from him the unflattering opinions she held of his intellect, his prowess, even his personal good looks, and he accepted the situation with a resigned philosophy creditable to so young a man, for whom many women would have liked to throw the fly and set the trimmer, undeterred by considerations of property or propriety, as is often the case with pretty anglers, who dearly love to inveigle their fish from other people's waters.

Ninety-nine men out of a hundred are soured by such disappointments; but the exception emerges from his ordeal mellowed, softened, improved, like a cask of Madeira that has doubled the Cape. Uncle John carried his burden, whatever it was, without complaint, and indeed seemed mildly cheerful under its weight, even at an age when it began to curve the falling shoulders and press the shrinking stature down towards the earth.

He looked more than his years now, taking his seat at the tea-table, with bent form and stiffened gestures; but the light of youth still kindled in his eye, and a smile joyous as that of the boy whom he addressed was on his face while he pressed the Etonian to remain over the morrow for one more day's practice at the art of which he seemed so enthusiastic a votary.

"I'll send you to the station to catch the early train next morning, and you'll be home for luncheon by three o'clock at the latest. I suppose, though, you can't get up. You young ones like bed, and I'm not sure you're wrong. It's the best place in this cold weather."

Young Perigord scouted the accusation. "Bed, Mr. Dennison? I should never go to bed at all, if I had my way. I should like to hunt or skate all day, and sit up all night playing billiards and smoking. Bed is only fit for old women."

"And old men," added his host. "Your plan of life sounds extremely useful. Unfortunately it would not last very long. No—no, my boy; hunting and skating as much as you like, but never stay up after twelve, except at a ball. Wherever the small hours are without the presence of ladies, there is mischief going on. Don't you agree with me, Annie?"

"No, I don't," said Annie; "that's the time we do a good deal of ours. But Mr. Perigord has a large shooting-party to entertain. We cannot hope he will sacrifice all his smart friends to *us*."

"It's not that!" exclaimed the boy eagerly. "But papa expects me, you know. And I shouldn't like to disappoint him, you know, though of course I'd much rather stay here."

"That's right, my lad," said Uncle John.

"I'll order the dog-cart to be ready at your own time to-morrow. Better have an hour or two on the ice before you go, and tell your father from me, as he won't come and stay here himself, he must let you pay us a longer visit next year."

"And I shall see you in London," exclaimed the young gentleman, addressing Annie with much *empressement.* "I'm safe to be in town, you know, for the Easter holidays and the Public School matches."

"You'll have forgotten me by Easter," answered Miss Dennison, laughing. "Besides, we're not likely to meet. I'm a very quiet person, and don't go to half-a-dozen balls in a season."

"Balls!" repeated the youth, with profound contempt. "You don't suppose I'd be seen at a ball? No—no. I'd rather go in for dinners and all that, only people don't ask a fellow about much till he's got whiskers. I dare say mine will be quite out of the common, but there's no appearance of them yet."

"If you sit there talking nonsense you'll be late again, Annie, as you were last night," interposed the warning voice of Mrs. Dennison. "You've barely three-quarters of an hour to dress now."

"That clock gallops, aunt," replied the young lady, with a glance at the chimney-piece. "Still great results cannot be attained without pains and patience. Tell me who is coming, and I shall regulate my get-up accordingly."

Mrs. Dennison looked black, while Uncle John answered with a laugh:

"London dandies, Annie—no use wasting too much finery on *them*. They're used to it, and would be more impressed with simplicity, and—what d'ye call it?—book-muslin."

"Ah! I know the London dandies well enough, and, for the matter of that, all dandies are much the same," replied Annie; whereat Mr. Lexley, who was *not* a dandy, looked pleased. "But I mean who else is there? Country neighbours, or anything of that kind?"

"Two officers from the Fort," said her uncle.

"Infantry officers?" demanded Stokes and Nokes in a breath.

"They *are* and they are *not*," replied Mr. Dennison. "Having a fort in our neighbourhood, commanded on all sides by wooded heights, we have also a battery. Now you cannot call the gunners infantry officers, because they are liable to be mounted at any time, which is a great advantage if they want to run away."

"They're not cavalry," said Nokes.

"All officers are dandies," observed Miss Annie. "It's my great objection to the service."

Nokes looked helplessly at his comrade, who felt called upon to take up the glove thus thrown down.

"Don't say so, Miss Dennison," he expostulated. "Didn't the Duke of Wellington declare the dandies made his best soldiers? And what was it Dr. Johnson or somebody said about fellows being slovens and beasts if

they weren't dandies? Fancy being a sloven, Miss Dennison! Why, it's worse than being a beast!"

"The greatest swell I ever saw," interposed young Perigord, "was a troop sergeant-major of heavy dragoons. Neither of *you* could hold a candle to him for manners, moustaches, and general swagger. Besides, he was a very handsome fellow too."

"Which you mean to imply we are *not?*" laughed Stokes. "All the more reason for availing ourselves of the decorative art. Miss Dennison, though you don't require any such assistance, I see you are going to refit. Let me light you a candle."

On reflection half an hour afterwards, while tying his white neckcloth, Stokes thought he had worded his little compliment rather neatly, though he feared it was lost on its object, who took her candle as usual from Mr. Lexley, and followed Aunt Emily demurely upstairs, under the portraits of many various coloured Dennisons, from the last squire in scarlet coat and hunting-cap to the Queen

Elizabeth's Dennison, of whom the family were proud, in peaked beard and trunk hose.

There is a great deal in habit. Lexley had acquired a habit of lighting Miss Dennison's candle, offering her wine-and-water at night, which she invariably refused, and shaking hands with her when he came down to breakfast, even if he did not drop into the vacant place at her side. To have missed any one of these observances would already have been felt as a slight contrariety in the day's pleasure; and although he would not have admitted that her presence affected his enjoyment of his visit one way or the other, he knew he had never spent so happy a time at the Priors before. There are two periods of life when the companionship of an agreeable and pretty woman seems insensibly but very pleasantly to enhance a man's daily comfort and well-being: before he has begun and after he has left off caring too much. In the first case, like a recruit learning the use of his new weapons, he acquires a daily increase of self-confidence and self-respect; in the second, like a veteran at a

review, he scans with critical eye and profound respect for his own judgment the display prepared for his gratification, admiring it none the less that for him the cartridges are now blank, and the manœuvres, however skilful, but the marches and countermarches of a sham fight.

Algernon Lexley had never yet been in action; was indeed in this respect a fine young recruit, perfectly raw and undrilled. In the society of Miss Dennison he felt elevated, invigorated, and, as he himself thought, humanised. He began to wish his strong sinewy hands were whiter, and to be critical as to the shape of his boots.

To-night, dressing for dinner, none the less carefully that the grating of wheels, ringing of bells, and bumping of boxes along the passage portended a new arrival, he was unusually careful in tying his white neckcloth, and hunted for a pin wherewith to fasten on his breast the flower he would be sure to find laid out for him on a table at the drawing-room door.

When the heathens offered a calf to Jupiter I fancy they always dressed it up in garlands, and no doubt the poor thing, gratified with its decorations, nibbled at the blossoms quite contentedly, unconscious it was so soon to be made veal.

CHAPTER III.

WINDOW UP OR DOWN.

A MAN may have travelled all over the world, including the Feejee Islands, yet find himself somewhat confused on the platform of one of our great railway stations, when a through train is starting for the other end of the kingdom. His luggage has disappeared on the shoulders of different porters in different directions, a barrowful of portmanteaus threatens his toes, a woman doubtfully sober, with a baby undoubtedly sick, offends his eye, and a shrill-voiced boy proclaiming the daily papers splits the drum of his ear. He has put his silver into the wrong pocket, probably without counting his change, and must undo

all his wraps to get at the ticket it is necessary for an official to inspect. He wants to smoke, though *not* in a smoking compartment, and finds every carriage full, but one which is placarded "Engaged," while, lest force of character and clearness of intellect should rise superior to and dominate these reverses, a fiend in velveteen completes his discomfiture by ringing a hand-bell, which deafens, stupefies, and reduces the victim to utter idiotcy and prostration.

Even Percy Mortimer and Horace Maxwell, the one a traveller from China to Peru, the other a citizen of the world, who knew his London from Dan to Beersheba, from the Agricultural Hall, Islington, let us say, to the Consumptive Hospital, Brompton, found themselves separated at the moment of entering the train that was about to take them down to Plumpton Priors, and defeated in their intention of travelling together that they might smoke in silence, and so thoroughly enjoy each other's conversation and society. That Maxwell acted quite loyally by his friend I

am not prepared to assert. While Mortimer, with the assistance of an invaluable servant, who never listened, never spoke, and never forgot, was establishing himself, his wraps, his travelling-bag, his luncheon-basket, his books, his pamphlets, and his newspapers, in the back seat of a first-class carriage, Horace, who had been buying 'Punch' at the book-stall, spied an attractive face and a remarkably well-gloved hand, belonging to a solitary lady in an adjoining compartment, and, either by good luck or skilful play, timed his departure so cleverly that had the guard not bundled him unhesitatingly into the seat opposite, he must have been left behind on the platform, which perhaps was no more than he deserved.

In common with many other young men of like education and habits, he could not resist the temptation of a pretty face accidentally encountered in railway, steamboat, exhibition, theatre, or other public place, where people are thrown on their own resources for an introduction. The uncertainty as to how they may be received seems to give a zest to the

cautious advances such men delight in making under such circumstances, and they find no doubt a spice of romance in their ignorance of the lady's antecedents, in the extreme improbability of meeting her again, and in the insane probability that here, at last, has been struck by blindest chance the vein of gold that shall adorn and enrich a lifetime. In spite of its folly and its danger, a leap in the dark has always proved fascinating to human nature, and, taken hand-in-hand with a pretty woman, men seldom pause to ask themselves what there is on the other side.

But *was* she a pretty woman? Maxwell, scrutinising her from behind his 'Punch' by instalments, as it were, and without staring, considered the question more than once before he decided in the affirmative.

She was *not* young, that was clear, not what *he* called young, in the flower and prime of manhood She might have been five-and-twenty, or five-and-thirty—the brightness of her hair, eyes, and complexion denoted the earlier age, while there was something of

repose, even dignity, in her bearing and gestures, seldom acquired by women till they have lost the fresher charms of youth. There is no mistaking the cut flowers of the drawing-room for their ungathered sisters in the garden. Her right hand was ungloved, and on its fourth finger were massed three or four hoop-rings, very suggestive of wedding presents.

"Yes," thought Horace, "that's a married woman's hand, and a very pretty hand it is. Just what I like: white, well-shaped, rather strong, and not too small. I wish she'd take off her *other* glove, and I should know for certain; though after all, what *can* it matter to *me?*"

Then he tried to fix his attention on 'Punch,' and found it was no use, so resumed the scrutiny of his *vis-à-vis*.

She was tall, that he inferred from the graceful indolence of her attitude as she leaned back in the low deep-cushioned seat; tall, and, unless he was much deceived by a seal-skin jacket, formed rather in the mould of Juno than Hebe. Her complexion was

pale, but with the pallor of a delicate skin, not a languid circulation; and her clear-cut features, like those we see on a cameo, were almost stern in their regularity. It was a face that looked as if it could be very immovable, very pitiless, yet that it would be well worth while to rouse into expression should the statue wake up to life. The hair, of a golden brown, was pulled tightly back in the severest style of modern fashion, a style only becoming when it grows, as it did here, exactly where it ought on the forehead and temples. Her ears were perfect, in colour and shape like little shells, and undisfigured by earrings.

As they came to the first tunnel Maxwell decided that, with eye-brows and eye-lashes a shade darker, this would be one of the best-looking women he ever saw in his life.

What a long tunnel it was! Emerging into day, he caught her eye in the act of scanning her fellow-traveller by lamp-light. This emboldened him to speak; but behold! they were once more in darkness; and he was glad of it, for Horace, usually ready enough

with his tongue, found he had nothing to say.

At last they came out into the open country, flying through the green pastures that skirt London at the rate of fifty miles an hour.

She was sitting with her back to the engine; but the old excuse served for a beginning, and he asked her if she would like the window up or down?

In the few words with which she answered he detected a certain tone used in that artificial state of society which he called "the world."

She spoke graciously enough, but with a perfect self-possession that told him he was in the presence of an equal, who would accept politeness as her due, without being the least flurried or flattered by his attentions.

Horace Maxwell could think of nothing better to say than that "it was very cold, though it looked like a thaw; but nothing *was* so cold as a thaw."

"Colder than a frost?" she asked with a smile; and added, "I am the worst possible

judge of weather; but I always fancy London is warmer than anywhere else."

"Do you like London?" said Horace, who had been looking in vain for a name on her dressing-case, a monogram on her travelling-bag, anything to identify his new acquaintance, and now thought he saw his way to a discovery. "People say it's the best place to live in. Perhaps you don't think so. Perhaps you don't live there?"

She smiled again, but it was rather a bitter smile.

"I don't *live* anywhere," she answered. "I vegetate, but, unlike most vegetables, I am not at all susceptible to weather, and, indeed, I care little about places. It's the same thing over and over again, whether you're in London or Paris, or Kamschatka or Japan."

"And you've been to them all?" said Maxwell in an accent of incredulity. "Why you must have travelled round the world!"

"Not exactly," she answered; "but though it sounds strange, I assure you I could find my way about St. Petersburg as easily as the

Regent's Park, which rather reminds me of it; and I dont know that I should be quite *désorientée* if you dropped me in the main street of Jeddo."

At the Foreign Office, it is to be presumed, the names at least of these places are known and their respective distances from the meridian of Greenwich.

"You take my breath away!" said Maxwell. "You seem to have been everywhere. You must be very fond of travelling."

"On the contrary, I hate it. I never wish to leave England again, and I never will."

While she spoke the delicate lips tightened, and there came into the beautiful features that look of determination which no man ever contemplates with pleasure on a woman's face.

"Then why did you go?" was the natural question, hastily amended by adding, "I beg your pardon, I have no right to ask."

She seemed to recognize the apology.

"I need not answer if I don't like," she said frankly and pleasantly, "but I will. I went because I couldn't help myself. I went

because I had no more power of resistance than the wave has when the wind beats it into spray against a rock. I went for the same reason a free African leaves his hut, and his wives, and his grease, and matting, and all that makes his happiness and his home, to cross the sweltering Bight of Benin in the hold of a slaver. I've seen something of *that* too. No, I am not a soft-hearted person; but I *was* sorry for the slaves. They were like me; they went because they couldn't help themselves."

She looked very handsome now, brightening while she spoke, and Maxwell thought that in a comfortable yacht, with all sea-faring means and appliances, he should not mind even the Bight of Benin with so charming a shipmate.

"I thought ladies never did anything against the grain," said he, trying back on the old worn theme of woman's wilfulness and woman's superiority. "I thought that by hook or by crook they always managed to have their own way."

"Then you must know very little about them," was the answer; and Maxwell felt so staggered that while they flew through two whole parishes he held his tongue.

Very little about them—he, a trained campaigner of at least five seasons!—Not a dandy, because there *are* no dandies now, but a dancing-man of the highest quality and calibre—who was asked everywhere, whom everybody knew, who had even led cotillons in the small hours, encouraged by good-humoured smiles from the most illustrious of guests—who had held, ever since he left school, that the proper study of mankind was woman, and that making love was the only pastime which could be permitted to interfere with hunting in the programme of a gentleman's occupations! And now to be told that he knew very little about them! If it was really so he had better give up the whole thing, marry, and settle down into a fogy at once.

When sufficiently recovered to begin again it was too late to try back on the old line, so he plunged boldly into a fresh subject with the following original remark:

"What a good train this is! We only stop once, at Muddleford Junction, and once again between that and Sludgeley, where, I am sorry to say, I get out."

"So do I," she replied, with something approaching a smile.

"How odd!" he said. "Somehow, I fancied you were going right through. I don't know why, I thought you had arranged yourself in this carriage for a long journey, and when the guard put me in I was afraid I might be in your way."

Detecting perhaps the insincerity of this flagrant statement, she deserved credit for the perfectly grave politeness with which she answered:

"Not at all. I never can see that one person is justified in monopolizing the accommodation for six; and I am such an experienced traveller as to be well able to take care of myself."

"Then, I fear, I can be of no use to you at Sludgeley," said he. "I meant to have offered

all kinds of assistance, but you must take the will for the deed."

"I am equally grateful," she answered. "But I have ordered a carriage to meet me, and even if it should fail I do not see quite how you could help. It would be too much to ask you to carry a lady's wardrobe, distributed in two large trunks, and a bonnet-box, though, to be sure, they are lighter than they look."

"That depends on how far you are going," he laughed. "For a short distance it might be done by taking one package at a time. I hope it's not a long drive," he added, tenderly; "it gets dark so soon at this time of year."

"Not very," she answered, parrying the insidious question as to her destination. "Though too long for a walking expedition with a load on one's back. But here we are at Muddleford. I *should* be obliged to you if you could get me a cup of tea. The platform looks so wet and sloppy, I had rather not get out."

Of course he was delighted, profuse in

offers of every other refreshment, and particular in inquiries as to whether she liked sugar, and how much milk, and shouldn't he bring a biscuit? etc. Though while he went on his errand a horrid and unjustifiable suspicion came across him that this unwillingness to quit her seat might proceed from some physical deformity his fair fellow traveller was anxious to conceal. He recollected a story hideous Adonis Brown was fond of telling at his club, how in the olden days of travelling he had fallen in love with a beautiful young lady in the North mail, who persistently declined to alight at any of their numerous stoppages because she had a wooden leg, but it was not till they got to Morpeth that he found it out. If this charming *vis-à-vis* should have a wooden leg too! How Percy Mortimer would laugh, and what a disillusion it would be! Just like his luck: he was always meeting with disillusions! And how was he to discover the truth? It was a great relief when he brought her the tea to observe a pair of very symmetrical boots resting on the footwarmer, and his

only anxiety while he took back the cup was lest Percy should see him and insist on his society as a faithful comrade during the remainder of the journey.

He need not have troubled himself. That gentleman, with an enormous cigar in his mouth, was deep in a stiff controversial work, which he preferred to the conversation of the most intimate friend. Percy was a great reader when the opportunity offered, and never forgot what he read; therefore it is needless to say his attention was not easily distracted from his book. Also, like most men who have learned how to *rough* it, he travelled with his comforts about him, quoting the example of one of his friends, who took a portmanteau full of evening clothes and French novels across the Himalayas, observing, with admirable good sense, "I must have twelve mules for myself and my people. It's only taking thirteen, and there are the little things one wants ready when one wants them."

If this principle were oftener carried out there would be far more enjoyment in daily

life for those classes who seem most discontented, while they possess most of the accessories that mankind in general consider essential to happiness.

The stoppage, the tea, the getting out and in, the effrontery with which Horace repulsed an invading party of one mamma, one nurse, one baby in arms, and two small children, by a barefaced statement that he was just recovering from whooping-cough, seemed to cement the acquaintance of these fellow-travellers into friendship. The discarded footwarmer had been replaced by a hotter one, of which she insisted on his taking his share; he arranged her wraps, pulled the window up, voted the carriage shook too much to read in comfort, and finally, after a long and desultory conversation, hazarded this touching suggestion:

"I wonder if I shall have the pleasure of seeing you again?"

"Why not?" she responded gaily, "as the French say, It is only the mountains that never come together. Many more extra-

ordinary things happen than meeting people in society whom one—who have been civil to one in a railway—"

"Yes. But the world is large, and it is too provoking to miss the very person of all others you want to see by being a minute too soon or a minute too late, by taking the wrong turn, or calling at the wrong house. Now if I knew where you were going—"

"You would know as much as I do, and would have no field for the exercise of that perseverance and ingenuity which I am convinced you possess. They are qualities that deteriorate sadly for want of exercise. When you are asked a riddle, don't you hate being told the answer in the same breath?"

"No; I don't. Tell me the answer."

"But I haven't asked you the riddle yet. Never mind, our journey has been very pleasant, and here we are, I do believe, at my station. You have been most kind and attentive, and I hope we *shall* meet again. Goodbye."

The train stopped, she shook hands with

him as he helped her from the carriage, bade a porter follow with her luggage, and left him standing on the platform, gazing after her graceful figure as it vanished through the door of departure

"With a ghost-seer's look when the ghost disappears."

He did not come to himself till his friend clapped him on the shoulder to inform him that "Dennison had sent the brougham, and they had better make a start."

"That's one of the nicest women I ever came across," answered Horace, like a man in a dream. "What an ass I am! She must have had her initials at least on her luggage, and I never thought of looking!"

"What an ass you are to care!" answered his friend. "Surely there are enough nice women in the world without this one. What *can* it matter? If you lose *her* you'll find somebody else. One is as good as another, and better too, as the Irishman said. Jump into the brougham, and if you won't smoke give me a light."

"Percy!" exclaimed the other, "you are a cynic—a heartless cynic. What has brought you to this state? It can't be experience, for I happen to know you're not half as old as you look."

"There is some comfort in that!" replied his friend with a grim smile. "I congratulate you on putting the case so pleasantly. It's not age, my good fellow, it's wisdom. I like knowledge for its own sake. Even the knowledge that teaches us our gods are clay, our bricks straw, and that our tobacco is shamefully adulterated with cabbage-leaves and opium."

"I never believe in you fellows who pretend you know all about women," argued Horace. "I never believe in any fellow who generalises. Horses have different dispositions, so have dogs; sheep too, and calves, I dare say, if one could only find out. Why should one woman be exàctly like another?"

"Why indeed?" replied is friend. "When the same woman is so different different days. I never said they were all alike—I hadn't

time; you were in such a hurry to proclaim your own opinion. But I will ask you one question. Why is it that those who know them least have the highest opinion of them?"

"*Omne ignotum pro magnifico*, I suppose," said Horace.

"*Pro terribili*, rather," answered Percy. "In the heart of man is planted a wholesome fear of his natural enemy. Doubtless from an instinct of self-preservation. Nothing amuses me more than to see a defenceless youth under the spells of an aggressive damsel. He is like a puppy playing round a cat, a little fascinated, a good deal puzzled; anxious to be on better terms, and frightened out of his wits all the time."

"And you? I suppose you consider yourself invincible and impenetrable? as wise as a serpent on this particular subject, and justified in thinking everybody else a fool."

"You express my sentiments in the present instance with considerable clearness. I do *not* think that young man wise who, associating

with a lady for an hour or two in a railway carriage, suffers his tranquillity, and consequently his digestion, to be affected by the probability that he will never see her again."

"What has digestion got to do with it? Hang it! my digestion's better than yours!"

"It ought to be. You take frightful liberties with it, and, I imagine, know no more about the delicate and beautiful mechanism of the human stomach than you do about the works in your watch. My dear fellow, I could tell you some most interesting facts bearing on appetite and its consequences, but that the organ we are at present discussing is not the liver—only the heart."

"Heart! I don't believe you ever had one! By Jove, Percy, I should—yes I *should* like to see a woman get you regularly into her hands. It would be as good as a play."

"I should rather like to see the woman who *could*," answered his friend, letting down the carriage window, and "looking over the side," as he called it, to know how fast they

were travelling. "Eleven miles an hour—good. These horses trot well. To be sure, they are going home. By the way, Horace, what sort of a cook has old Dennison got? I dined with him once in London, and there was nothing fit to eat. As it was years ago, however, I trust the performer of that era has left the kitchen for a cooler sphere."

"Oh! I should think he'd give you as good a dinner as anybody else," replied Horace. "The shooting's capital, I fancy; and there's a pleasant party staying in the house. Not too many, you know; and some nice girls. I *do* like a country-house, don't you?"

"It is too dark to see your face, my dear fellow," replied the other gravely, "so I may be excused for asking if you are in earnest. Do I like being jammed into the society of a herd of people with whom I have nothing in common, whether I will or no, as one is on board ship, only without the change and excitement of a sea-voyage? Do I like to come down early to breakfast, and spoil the whole comfort of that meal by eating it in public,

like an old king of France; to be hurried off through wet plantations to a stable, or a kennel, or even a conservatory, if I want to smoke; to be turned out of my bedroom when I retire to write my letters, by the flopping of housemaids, whose presence in every sense pervades the house at all periods of the day; to find the drawing-room resounding with music, the gallery garrisoned by young ladies, and the hall, where there is a spare blotting-book, given up to battledore-and-shuttlecock? Do I like servants waiting at luncheon, cold drives in the afternoon, an enormous tea at six o'clock to spoil one's dinner at eight; the whole concluded by an evening of bad singing and worse whist? No, I do *not* like it, and I can't understand how anybody does."

"Then why do you go?" asked the other.

"Because I don't hate it half as much as I think," replied Percy. "It so often turns out better than one expects. Tell us, have you any idea what sort of people we shall find at this place? We can't be far off now."

"A house full," answered the other. There's Foster, I know."

"The Master of the Hounds, isn't he?" asked Percy. "I conceive the sort of man exactly: middle-aged, bald, close-shaved, red-faced, and very short in his answers. Sure to sit next one at dinner. I shall ask him if he has had nice hunting this winter, and after that he will let me alone. Who else?"

"His wife," continued Horace, "you won't care much about *her*. A long parson named Lexley—rather a good fellow; I was at Rugby with him. Two plungers, named respectively Nokes and Stokes"—

"Stokes!" interrupted his friend. "Anthony Stokes? I haven't seen him since I dined in his bungalow at Meerut: but I heard from him this morning, and his letter was dated Plumpton Priors. By the way, he was very full of a young lady staying there—a Miss Dennison—spoke of her as an out-and-outer! Shall we find *her*, I wonder?"

"I was coming to that," said Horace. "I had a letter from Lexley, and he was full of her too. He writes as if he was spoony already; but then I think parsons are very easily knocked over."

"They're not bad judges either," replied his friend. "They seem to understand the raw material. Haven't you observed, Horace, what nice girls generally marry parsons, and how they deteriorate in a year or two as parsons' wives?"

"No, I haven't," said Maxwell, who had a pretty cousin settled down at a rose-grown rectory in Somersetshire. "Nice girls don't deteriorate in the country more than in London. The fact is a pretty woman once is a pretty woman always."

"Ah! you've never seen a Circassian thirty years old!" answered the traveller. "I can tell you, my boy, she's a caution to snakes! I say, we must be in the approach now. It's infernally dark, and the moon has gone in again. I suppose this fellow knows the way to his own door."

But Horace had let the window down and was peering eagerly into the night. Presently he drew in his head.

"I declare I believe it's going to thaw!" said he, in a tone of solemnity suitable to the

occasion. "It's pitch dark; the air is much softer, and I fancied just now I felt something like a drop of rain."

"I hope not," replied Mortimer with a shudder, conjuring up a vision of wet mornings in a country-house, to be whiled away with indoor games, general conversation, and other pastimes to which he professed a steady aversion. "I hope not, indeed; and yet you seem to like the idea."

"Why, don't you see," argued Maxwell, "if it thaws we shall have hunting."

"What's the use of that? You haven't sent any horses here, no more have I."

"Oh! Dennison would mount us, I am sure. He is a capital old fellow, and can ride pretty straight still, they tell me, if everything goes right; but he seldom comes out now, and keeps two or three hunters, chiefly for his friends. I believe it's a charming country, nearly all grass. Doesn't that tempt you?"

"Not on a strange horse, badly broke, badly bridled, disagreeably fresh, and if one does drop into a run, not fit to go. No, my

dear fellow; I hunt for pleasure; and upon my word, when I think of all one goes through, with catching weather, long distances, bad sport, lame horses, and funking like blazes, there is very little pleasure about it, and one would be much happier sitting at home by the fire."

"So even hunting is not good enough? I never saw such a fellow as you, Percy. Is there anything you *do* like?"

"I like *everything*, my boy; only I'm not an enthusiast; that's to say, one thing does not bore me more than another. Perhaps, after all, the material pleasures of life, the real tangible comforts, are the most enjoyable. I pity a poor devil breaking stones on the road, less for the hard work than the hard fare. It must be so wretched to go home and sit down to a bad dinner in the same clothes—no wash, no slippers, no dressing-room fire. What we all delight in is warmth, ease and repose, a good cook, and a good appetite; good wine, plenty of light, pleasant company, and a comfortable house after a cold journey. Here we are."

CHAPTER IV.

CHAMPAGNE—SWEET OR DRY?

NOTHING could induce Percy Mortimer to hurry himself. His dinner toilet would have been none the less elaborate had he known twenty people were waiting for him to begin their meal. Half an hour's law, however, was accorded, in consideration of the late arrivals; so he emerged from his room, very sleek and well dressed, to descend the wide staircase, with a few seconds' start of his friend, conscious that he had plenty of time. Following close on his steps Maxwell reached the landing as Mortimer crossed the hall, and looking down from that point of vantage was no less delighted than surprised to see his companion

of the railway, statelier and handsomer than ever in her dinner dress, stop short on her way to the drawing-room, and accost the traveller with considerable cordiality.

"Good Heavens! Mrs. Delancy!" said Percy, as they shook hands. "Who would have thought of finding *you* here?"

"Hush! Mr. Mortimer," she replied; "not Mrs. Delancy in this house. Perhaps—perhaps—you had better not seem to know me at all." And with a scared look at Maxwell, as if aware that he had overheard her, she turned very pale, and passed on. Imperturbable Percy followed into the drawing-room without moving a muscle of his countenance, but Maxwell made rather a preoccupied bow to his hostess, and took refuge in the general depression that overhangs an assemblage of people waiting for dinner, to recover his wits a little, and get the better of his surprise.

The important meal being announced almost immediately, and Aunt Emily marshalling her guests with the skill of a practised tactician,

he was roused from his meditations by word of command.

"Mr. Maxwell, please to take Miss Blair."

Looking in vain for that lady, he was completely mystified to find his fellow-traveller waiting to place her hand within his arm. "How can she be Miss Blair if she's Mrs. Delancy?" thought Horace. "He *said* 'Mrs. Delancy,' I could take my oath. What does it all mean?"

Like a wise man he pulled himself together, and determined to await the lady's explanation, or to have none at all. She certainly *was* very handsome, seen *en profile*, as she arranged herself at the dinner-table; very classical, and well-dressed. He stole a look at her left hand, but could not make out if she wore a wedding-ring; yet his friend called her "Mrs. Delancy," not "Miss," he was sure.

The soup passed off without a word, but before they brought him lobster sauce for his turbot she turned round, and in a low voice observed:

"I told you it was only the mountains that

never came together. I had not an idea then that we were to meet this evening. I don't think I half thanked you for your kindness when I got out of the train. Thank you, now. I'd stand up and make a curtsey if we were not at dinner. But I mean it; you were most attentive and polite."

"You must have thought me a great bore when I forced my way into your carriage," said he, beginning to feel that he had taken a liberty. "But the train was full—the guard hustled me in at the last moment, and there was nothing for it but to intrude on you or be left behind."

"I am glad you were not left behind," she answered, "particularly on my account, and I am sure you did everything in your power to find another place. I never saw so scared a face as yours when you passed along the train on your way from the book-stall. I felt quite sorry for you—ordered helplessly into my carriage, whether you would or no."

The tone convinced him that she had detected, and was not displeased by, his admi-

ration at first sight. It emboldened him to embark on a flirtation without delay.

"I am very grateful to the guard," he said. "I own I did linger at the door of the carriage you were in, with some faint hope my luck might land me there for the whole journey. I trust you are not displeased at the confession."

Horace had a great idea of "making running from the start," as he called it. She replied rather coldly:

"There is nothing to please or displease me in the matter; but you behaved very badly to your friend in deserting him without a word of excuse."

"Oh, Percy Mortimer don't mind," said Horace; "he likes nobody's society so well as his own; and he's not far wrong, for a pleasanter fellow one seldom comes across. But you know him, don't you? I saw you shake hands with him when we came down to dinner."

The pale face certainly turned paler, while she answered, looking straight before her:

"Yes—no—that is to say—(give me a little

water, please)—I've met him abroad. He's been a great traveller, you know, and so have I."

"Exactly," replied Horace, carelessly yet with intention. "A travelling acquaintance, like myself; only I wonder you didn'nt make a deeper impression, for I heard him call you by a wrong name."

There was no doubt of her paleness now; even her lips were white. But at this juncture an arm clad in broadcloth came between them, and a solemn voice, offering "Champagne —sweet or dry?" afforded a moment's respite, during which she recovered her presence of mind, and prepared for a bold stroke.

"Mr. Maxwell," said she, looking him full in the face, with her clear grey eyes, "can you keep a secret?"

"Every gentleman can," he answered, in a low earnest voice.

"Without understanding, or trying, or even wishing, to understand it?"

"Honour is honour. Miss Blair, tell me your secret."

While he spoke, one of those ominous silences which are apt to fall on a dinner-party at the most inconvenient moments, caused everybody to turn an expectant ear for her answer. In parliamentary language, Miss Blair was "in possession of the house," and few ladies could have been less embarrassed by the situation.

"I like sweet champagne better than dry," said she, with perfect gravity; "it is a humiliating confession, yet I don't feel the least ashamed of it."

"Bravo!" exclaimed young Perigord, who had been trying both. "She's quite right. So do I."

The din of conversation began again, louder for its temporary cessation. She took advantage of it to whisper in Maxwell's ear,

"I know I can trust you. I wonder what you think of it all; but you will never allude to this again?"

"To your liking for sweet champagne?" he answered, laughing. "Certainly not. Trust me all in all, or not at all—whichever you

please. But there's a deal of bad wine about," he added, conscious that his voice was again rather too audible, "Lots of stuff they call champagne, that has no sort of right to the name."

"What *is* in a name?" said Miss Blair.

And they felt they understood each other from that moment.

It was a pleasant sensation enough, Maxwell thought, to have made a treaty of alliance with this handsome and mysterious dame. He knew so little of her, and admired her so much, not having made out who she was, why she came, what position she occupied in society, nor indeed anything about her, except that she was very good-looking and perfectly well-dressed. Unlike his friend Mortimer, Horace dearly loved the easy life of a country house; but he began to think that this was going to be one of the most agreeable visits he had ever paid, and found himself hoping the weather would be too bad to permit out-of-door amusements, and that he might find an excuse for spending all to-morrow in the

society of this charming person, whom he did not quite like to think of as Mrs. Delancy, yet could hardly bring himself to call Miss Blair.

And she, being a true woman, determined to accept the pleasure of the moment without consideration for results. She had liked Horace Maxwell's looks when she saw him on the platform of the railway station, and was by no means averse to his sharing the solitude of her journey. He improved on acquaintance, and in wishing him good-bye she was perfectly sincere while she expressed a hope of meeting him again. It was decidedly a pleasant surprise to find that they were inmates of the same house, and when she was recognised so unexpectedly in his hearing by his friend, she felt that to no one would she rather become an object of curiosity, and consequently of interest, than to the good-looking agreeable young gentleman who sat at dinner by her side.

It was her nature to enjoy the present without troubling herself about the future, and the course of her life from girlhood had taught her to bask in such gleams of sunshine

as she could catch, undismayed by the clouds that were lowering in the future, undefeated by the storms that had devastated the past.

"I can take care of myself," she thought, "or my training has been indeed worse than useless, and I need not be afraid of burning my own fingers at a game I have resolved never to play in earnest again. I suppose he can't stay less than three days, and it will give one quite an interest in life to see how much may be done in so short a time. I shall make him like me just enough to feel that he has never before had so delightful a visit, and to be quite low and uncomfortable for a week after he goes away; not more. He is very nice, and it would be a shame to make him unhappy, though he couldn't complain, for I believe men never have mercy upon *us*. He looks as if he would *care* too, when one gets through the outer crust of worldliness they all think it necessary to affect—as if it were a merit to possess no sympathies, no opinions, no feelings, and no brains. Men with eyes like his always have some romance in them,

if one can only get at it, and a man's romance is more utterly idiotic, I do think, than a woman's! I have made a good beginning. I don't remember ever doing so much in so few hours; but to-morrow morning, when we come down to breakfast, will be the test. I have seen them in the most degraded state of slavery, when they handed one's candle at bed-time, and free as air, with an excellent appetite, next morning. I fancy they exchange horrid sentiments in the smoking-room, and reflect on them while they shave. I do not think, though, I shall be clumsy enough to let him escape like that. Three whole days! Yes, in three days I ought to bring him thoroughly and scientifically into bondage. I know I could if I had him all to myself; but just at the first stage anything like interference is apt to spoil the whole thing. Let me see; who is there here that I need be afraid of? Nobody but Miss Dennison; the others are all old women or guys. But she *might* be dangerous with all that beautiful hair, and the half shy manner men find so captivating, admiring it as

they do a smart dress, without troubling themselves to know how it is made and put on. Well, she's got her hands full now, at any rate. I never saw Percy Mortimer so taken before."

During these meditations dinner proceeded solemnly through its appointed routine, on the different courses of which Mortimer experimentalised coolly and perseveringly to the end. The great business of eating, however, did not prevent his appreciating the good looks and good humour of his neighbour Annie Dennison, whose refined beauty, freshened up by country air, was exactly to the taste of a man who had studied and compared the personal advantages of women in every climate under the sun. She too could not but enjoy the conversation of one of the best-informed and pleasantest talkers in London, so they soon struck up an alliance, cemented by the playful manner in which she identified for him the different guests, with most of whom he was unacquainted.

"You are always amusing, Miss Dennison,"

said he, "and never ill-natured. I feel as if I had known and respected everybody here from boyhood. Even Mrs.—what did you say her name was?—the lady with a head like a haystack, and a double chin—no, I beg your pardon, a double chin doubled over again."

"I have already told you," answered Annie, laughing in spite of herself; "but if you choose to make personal remarks I shall leave you to your ignorance, and devote myself to an admirer I have been neglecting sadly on my other side."

"So you ought," said the Etonian, who occupied that position, "You've hardly spoken three words to me since I sat down. You'll be sorry for it to-morrow, when I'm gone."

"I'm sorry for it now," replied Miss Dennison; "but it's too late for reparation. When Aunt Emily begins putting her gloves on, it means we're all to take flight. There—I told you so—run and open the door, that's a good boy!"

The young gentleman having performed this office with creditable self-possession, returned

to seat himself by Percy, and filling his glass with claret, observed, after a deep sigh, "Oh, dear! I wish I was grown up. Would'nt I just like to be *you*, Mr. Mortimer, and not going away to-morrow, It seems so jolly to be a man!"

With that the young reprobate winked solemnly, and passed the decanters, recommending his neighbour to make the best use of his time, for they had dined half an hour later than usual, and the butler would bring coffee at a quarter to ten—"The only thing," he whispered, "that I should like to see altered in this house."

"How do you manage at Eton?" asked Percy, much delighted with his new friend. "In my time there was no claret, and if I remember right, very little coffee."

"Were you at Eton?" exclaimed the boy. "Tell us, wasn't it much jollier then than it is now? Only they swished a good deal more, didn't they? I'm not so sure I should have liked *that*."

"It was very good fun," answered Percy,

who entertained no great belief in the delights of boyhood, but had a vivid recollection of birch and block. "Still, I don't think I should like to do it all over again."

"That's just what I say," continued the lad, his eyes sparkling, his tongue loosened, the bloom and brightness of his youth freshened, like May flowers after rain, by Mr. Dennison's good wine. "Now my governor's always preaching to me about this being the happiest time of my life—that I've no cares, no troubles, only a few lessons to do, and nothing else to think of but enjoying myself. I don't know; it seems to me when you're grown up there are six whole holidays every week, no chapel, no absence called, and no lock-up at night."

"Don't you think a life of whole holidays would get very wearisome at last?" said Lexley. "All play and no work would make Jack a duller boy than the reverse. Don't you find the days a little too long sometimes, even now?"

"No, I don't," answered Perigord. "Not when there's lots of cricket. I say, I saw you

play once at Lord's. Do you remember what a good score you made off Twister's bowling? I wish you would take pupils; I'd ask my governor to let me come to you directly I leave Eton—I know he means to take me away the end of next half."

Having thus delivered himself, the young gentleman coloured violently, edged his chair nearer the clergyman, and stammered:

"I say, I beg your pardon, I didn't mean to take a liberty—only if I could do what I liked, I would rather read with *you* than any fellow I ever saw."

"He's a gentleman," thought Percy, "this noisy young scamp;" and wishing to cover the boy's embarrassment, warmly encouraged the idea.

"You might do worse, Mr. Lexley," said he. "It would be a capital thing for Mr. Perigord, and a pleasant fellow to keep you company in that lonely parsonage would be the greatest blessing on earth. I advise you to consider it."

"I shouldn't mind," replied the clergyman laughing, "if Perigord ever thinks of it again —which is doubtful."

"I'll ask the governor directly I get home," exclaimed the boy, delighted to find his suggestion taken in good part. "Won't it be jolly? We'll make a cricket-ground, get up an eleven, and play the county. *I* told you so—here comes old Dot-and-go-one with the coffee. Half a glass of sherry, please; I always allow myself a 'whitewash'; thanks. I feel better now, and almost equal to joining the ladies."

So he followed the gentlemen across the hall in the highest spirits, no whit diminished by a little interview with Uncle John, who brought up the rear, when a warm shake of the hand and something like the chink of gold passed between the host and his boyish guest.

Though strictly "private and confidential," this delicate transaction was detected by Mr. Foster, who lingered in his official capacity to consult a barometer that stood near the door

"Fallen more than a quarter of an inch," said he, in his short dry tones; "thought it

would change when I drove back from the kennels. If the wind gets up it will do."

"Do you think we shall be obliged to hunt?" asked Uncle John, considering how many people he would have to mount, and wondering if the stud-groom had gone to bed.

"No frost in the ground," answered Mr. Foster; "two hours rain would take all the snow away, particularly in that Middleton country. If it's a *good* thaw we might hunt at twelve o'clock. Glad I sent out the appointments for *this* week at any rate. Plumpton Bridge is only two miles from here. The ladies won't have to make an early start."

"You'll draw Plumpton Osiers, of course?" said Uncle John. "It's a certainty for a run."

"There was a good fox there last time," answered Mr. Foster, following the other gentlemen into the drawing-room.

His entrance caused all the party to move from their seats as if they had been playing Puss-in-the-Corner, upsetting thereby one or two pleasant arrangements for prolonged *tête-à-têtes.*

"It's a thaw, Mr. Foster!" exclaimed Miss Dennison, making him a profound curtsey in the middle of the room. "No more skating for *us*—no more grumbling for *you*. I can hear the old ash at the window moaning and creaking as if he had the rheumatism in all his branches; and Aunt Emily's maid, who has been down into the village, came back half an hour ago wet through and through. What is it doing now, John?" she asked of a footman who appeared with tea.

"Raining 'ard, Miss," replied John, inwardly rejoicing that his duties rendered him profoundly indifferent to weather.

So one lady after another fired her little volley at Mr. Foster, even Miss Blair expressing satisfaction and wishing him good sport. Only his wife and Aunt Emily remained unmoved. Mrs. Foster's rest had been broken on many a cold winter's night by her husband's anxiety about the weather, and Aunt Emily scorned every kind of amusement as being more or less a waste of time.

On John's reappearance to collect empty

tea-cups, his master created a strong sensation by bidding him "let Mr. Surcingle know he was not to send any horses out to-morrow morning till he had been to the house for orders." And when Foster demanded emphatically "if it was quite certain the country would be stopped?" everybody felt that the great business of winter life was about to begin again.

"I suppose we all mean to hunt?" said the host, after a pause of consideration. "Annie, you can ride Sweep; I don't want you to come to grief, and no power on earth would induce Sweep to attempt a fence he wasn't sure of getting over.'

"Thank you, Uncle John," replied Annie.

"Miss Blair," continued Dennison, "what would *you* like to do? There will be two carriages and plenty of room. Will you go on wheels?"

"If you please," answered Miss Blair. "I dare say Mrs. Dennison will be going too."

"Mrs. Foster, yourself, Emily, and one of the gentlemen, would fill the waggonette. Lexley, will you take care of them?"

Mr. Lexley would be delighted. He was "not a hunting parson," he said, and already had begun to debate in his own mind whether Miss Blair in the carriage would not prove as attractive a companion as Annie Dennison on horseback.

"The barouche can take four more," continued Uncle John. "And now for the hard riders. Have you two soldiers made any arrangements for going into action so suddenly?"

Stokes had left orders with his groom to bring on a horse if the hounds came; and Nokes's servant would do whatever Stokes's servant did.

"I can manage the rest well enough," said Mr. Dennison. "Mortimer, you shall ride Tiptop. He's nearly as old as I am; but a better hunter never went into a field. Bold, temperate, fast and *very* confidential."

Percy Mortimer expressed great unwillingness to trespass on his host's kindness; he had no regular hunting things, he was always afraid of hurting another man's horse, he didn't know his way about, he wasn't used to the country, etc.; but all such excuses were

overruled by Uncle John and scouted by his niece.

"If you don't want to ride," said Annie, looking very mischievous and pretty, "I mean *really* to ride, you can come through the gates and take care of *me*."

Percy Mortimer had seen many a good run in his life. He thought it would be no great hardship to lose one while engaged in so congenial an occupation.

"There's only Maxwell unprovided for," observed the host, turning to that gentleman. "I could manage for you too," he added thoughtfully, "if you don't dislike riding a young horse."

"You're not going to mount him on Barmecide?" exclaimed Aunt Emily. "The brute ran away with one of the grooms the very last day he was out."

Nobody but Foster detected the shadow of anxiety that crossed Miss Blair's face; but the M. F. H. was a man who saw everything and said nothing.

"Barmecide will make a very good hunter,"

answered the owner. "He's a little eager and troublesome when hounds are not running, but if you don't mind that, Maxwell, and his having rather a light mouth, he will carry you in a run as well as anything I've got."

Horace, who was a good horseman, expressed his gratitude, and already imagined himself sailing away over the wide pastures of Plumpton Lordship and Middleton Lacy.

"Then there's nothing left for *you*, Uncle John," expostulated Annie, who always took him under her own especial care. "Boniface is lame, and the Weazel is much too small for a hunter."

"The Weazel will do perfectly well, Annie," answered her uncle. "I don't think I shall even go to see you find, for I must attend a magistrate's meeting in Middleton at one, so you shall tell me all about it when you come home. Only mind, I won't have you ride too straight, even on Sweep."

Many and loud were the protestations of Mortimer and Maxwell as to taking Mr. Dennison's horses, dismounting him, and so forth,

all of which he cut short with more good-nature than sincerity.

"I couldn't hunt if I would," said he, "and I wouldn't if I could. I tire before my horse now. I am afraid of getting wet, and I daren't ride over a water furrow if I'm cold. The fire-side is the best place for old gentlemen in bad weather. I wish I wasn't obliged to go to this meeting to-morrow, but there is no help for it."

"You always make yourself out so much older than you are!" cried Miss Annie. "I believe it's laziness. The very last time the hounds met here, who was it jumped the Plumpton Brook before all the young men? Mr. Foster told me; didn't you, Mr. Foster?"

"He ought to have known better," said the M. F. H.

"I was on Tiptop," replied Uncle John, trying not to look pleased. "Foster's quite right; there's no fool like an old one; but I couldn't bear to disappoint the horse. If you come to water, Mortimer, you may ride at it with perfect confidence. Directly he sees the

willows he makes up his mind. Now let's have some music."

So the rector's daughters sang their duet pretty well, Maxwell talking to Miss Dennison in an audible whisper all the time, and then Nokes, coming out in a new light, and urged by the entreaties of his comrade, gave them an excellent comic song, the effect of which was much enhanced by his gravity during its delivery. In the lull that succeeded there arose a call for Annie, but that young lady strenuously refused to leave her seat.

"Everything's flat after a good comic song," said she, "and you'd all begin to laugh again if I were to sit down and croak out one of my melancholy ditties. Mr. Maxwell, if you're not afraid, I'll fight you at bezique."

"What business has she to take possession of him like that?" thought Miss Blair, who was no great card-player, and had already made an almost imperceptible motion of her skirt, which he might have interpreted as a permission to sit on the ottoman by her side. "I wonder if she's very innocent or very art-

ful. I believe she's a flirt. As if Mr. Maxwell wasn't enough, there's Mr. Mortimer looking over her hand. advising her. Oh! I dare say. Much advice *you* require, you rapacious little wretch!—and if I chose—if I only chose—I could sail down upon you, and cut you out with both in less than five minutes. I've a great mind to try, only Mrs. Dennison wouldn't like it; and after all, what's the use? What's the use of anything now? Oh, dear! oh, dear! how I wish I had my time to come over again!"

She was no longer in the drawing-room at Plumpton Priors; she was living in the past once more, and looking back on many a varied scene of romance, triumph, excitement—everything but real happiness. Sailing on golden seas in the moon-lit night of the tropics, riding camels through the blazing noon of the desert, holding animated converse with a black mask on in foreign ball-rooms—listening, as Eve listened to the serpent, while a soft voice told the old false tale under the cedars in an island of the Greek sea. Now in pleasure and

triumph, anon in shame and sorrow; but up or down, rich or poor, in the flush of success or the humiliation of defeat, always draining the cup of life to the dregs, and always finding more bitter than sweet in the draught.

And once she had been such a happy, frank-hearted girl. Good? Yes, surely she was good then; anxious only to fulfil her daily task, and pleased with a word of approval from those who taught. Could she be the same being that once found pleasure in making her doll's clothes and driving a hoop round the garden? Impossible! She felt pity for herself, as if the life she was looking back on had been another's and not her own. Aunt Emily's voice quite startled her with its imperious request, "Laura, will you play us something?" and the harsh tones, less of entreaty than command, had to be repeated more than once before she woke up sufficiently to obey.

As she walked to the pianoforte she was herself again, and it did not escape her penetration that two gentlemen of the party were

already sufficiently interested to desist from their respective occupations at the mention of her Christian name. Horace Maxwell blundered the "royal marriage" he was entitled to mark, while Lexley deserted Mrs. Foster, to whom he was talking by the fire, without finishing his sentence, and marched across the room to search for music, turn over leaves, and place his services generally at the disposal of the performer.

Play them something! She determined she *would* play them something, and that in a style to which they were totally unaccustomed. From her earliest childhood she had made the pianoforte a confidant and expositor of her inmost feelings; a rare natural talent had been developed by unremitting practice, and there were few professional players who could have rivalled Miss Blair in taste, sentiment and finish on her favourite instrument.

So she let her fingers wander over the keys in a slow, wild, monotonous movement, that seemed to grow into music as the painter's sketch grows into a picture. There were

chords — there were variations — there was much brilliancy of execution—but through it all ran a sad sweet strain that woke in each listener's heart the one dear memory of a lifetime. Before she had played five minutes cards were neglected, voices hushed, and over each attentive face, of old and young, men and women, alike, came the gentle wistful look of those who recall an unforgotten sorrow, who turn once more, resigned, but spirit-broken, to say farewell across a grave.

When the last faint notes, floating, as it were, dreamily away, trembled into silence, even Aunt Emily, shading her face with a fire-screen, had tears in her eyes, while Mrs. Foster, the least impressionable person that could be imagined, sobbed outright.

Perhaps, however, Algernon Lexley, a man of warm feelings and vivid imagination, the stronger that it was habitually repressed, felt more than the rest how resistless were the spells of this enchantress. Three short hours ago, making the best of his appearance while dressing, he had been quite prepared to fall

in love with Annie Dennison, but now it began to seem impossible that he should have been attracted by any woman on earth except Miss Blair. Her pale beauty, her air of high breeding (so often independent of high birth), her tasteful dress, above all, something half sad, half reckless in the expression of her face, as if she were a woman with a history, seemed especially captivating to a man of cultivated mind, who lived in the retirement of a country parish; but when she sat down to the pianoforte, and drew the heart out of his breast with such music as she alone could make, it was all over! Lexley did not even feel ashamed to admit that he, who had been a free man at a quarter before eleven P.M., was seriously, irrevocably, madly in love with a lady of whom he knew literally nothing, at a quarter past.

A silence, more flattering than the loudest applause, succeeded her performance, broken at length by Percy Mortimer's ill-advised "Encore!"

Looking up, she caught Lexley's eyes fixed

on her with an expression there was no mistaking, though he averted them in confusion, and exclaimed almost rudely, "No, no! Let us go to bed and dream, with that beautiful air ringing in our ears!"

"Thank you, Mr. Lexley," said she. "Do you know, that is the prettiest compliment ever paid to my music yet?"

He blushed—actually blushed—like a boy, and turned away without answering, while the rest of the party expressed their admiration in the usual terms; young Perigord adding, "that he should like very much to hear Nokes sing his song over again."

In less than half an hour a hush of rest pervaded the length and breadth of Plumpton Priors. Gentle snores might indeed be heard in pantry and attics, but with the exception of one other apartment, profound silence, only broken by the pattering of rain on roof and skylight, reigned in bed-chambers, galleries, and corridors, through the whole building.

This apartment, too, was occupied less noisily than usual. In spite of a blazing fire,

sporting prints, an array of soda-water bottles, a square spirit case, and such easy chairs and ample sofas as denoted the smoking-room, it contained but two inmates, Mortimer and Maxwell; the traveller arrayed in gorgeous costume, like an Eastern prince, his friend clad in a tattered suit of grey that seemed to have done good service in the Highlands of Scotland. Each gentleman, with six inches of tobacco in his mouth, looked very comfortable, and disposed to hold his tongue. Mortimer was the first to speak.

"How it rains!" said he. "Listen Horace! What an 'ender' you'll get to-morrow with the young one, about the third fence!"

"That's a pleasant remark," answered the other, "and encouraging to a friend. I begin to wish he had offered me Tiptop, only I suppose nothing would induce you to get on a five-year-old?"

"Nothing," said Percy, conclusively.

"Then it's better as it is. Well, I shouldn't wonder if we do have a gallop. One generally drops into sport after a frost; and it's a rare

good country. I say, Percy, that's a charming woman we came down with in the train."

"*We!* You mean *you.* I had nothing to do with it. I never was more surprised in my life than when I found her here."

Each gentleman puffed out a volume of smoke, and looked in the other's face. Horace would have given a great deal to ask his friend a single question; Percy had every inclination personally to satisfy the other's curiosity, but both felt that between them there was a woman's secret, and respected it accordingly.

"Have some soda-water?" asked Maxwell, after a pause, pouring a little brandy into a glass the size of a stable-pail. "I tell you I don't think I ever heard such a player before. I wouldn't have believed a pianoforte could be made to do so much."

"How it's legs will fill to-morrow," said Percy; "like Barmecide's when you've had your fun out of him in this deep ground. I thought you hated music, Horace?"

"Not such music as that," answered Max-

well indignantly. "It was enough to make a fellow cry. Lexley *did*. At least, I saw him take out his handkerchief."

"He seems rather a good fellow, that long parson, though he *is* a friend of yours," yawned Mortimer. "I shall be off to bed when I've finished this cigar."

"I wonder if she's going to stay," continued the other, still harping on the musician. "I should like to hear her play again."

"She'll stay longer than you do," replied his friend; "and play whenever she is asked. I fancy she is a sort of companion to Mrs. Dennison. The niece told me all about it in the drawing-room, only she said they made a secret of the whole thing."

"Women always make secrets," observed Maxwell, lighting his candle.

"And always let them out," said Mortimer. "Good-night."

CHAPTER V.

PLUMPTON OSIERS.

For any purpose but hunting, a less promising morning has seldom dawned than that which met Mr. Foster's eyes as he opened his dressing-room window and looked out. The storm had lulled indeed, but a steady warm rain fell persistently, and already there were few patches of snow to be seen, even in the most sheltered corners of the park.

"Hounds might run to-day," thought the M. F. H. while he shaved. "And if there's anything like a scent in that country, a run from the Osiers means about the best thing of the season. We're *sure* to find; no doubt of *that*, I think. Hang it! I hope Potter will

get his hounds away together. What a mess he made of it last time!" Then he cut himself and went to his wife's room for sticking-plaster. While he adjusted a patch, what a number of things he thought of, and how many were calculated to mar his anticipations of enjoyment! Where were they likely to leave off? And how should he arrange for his second draw? If the fox made his point for Stockwell Lings, the line would be straight across Screwman's farm, and next day's post was safe to bring him a complaint for damage done to young wheat; whereas if he faced the Vale, with the hope of reaching Marston main earths, the hounds would run right through the park at Lower Plumpton, a district literally alive with hares, and there would be six couple of puppies out whom he could trust only where they had no temptation to riot. Then Jim, the second whip, a very useful lad, was inclined to be delicate, so a thorough wetting would do him no good; while it was Whitethorn's turn to carry Potter, and like many others, he was not quite a good horse in deep ground.

Forty minutes on a day like this would be sure to see him out. Altogether, by the time the M. F. H. got down to breakfast he had created a whole catalogue of failures and contingencies, any one of which would be sufficient to spoil his day's amusement.

A man need be very fond of hunting to undertake the management of a country, even under the most favourable circumstances. Mr. Foster was devoted, heart and soul, to the chase. No doubt he had his reward.

Coming down to breakfast, he became, of course, the object of attention to all. Annie sugared and creamed his tea, with the utmost nicety; Miss Blair handed him an egg; the butler cut for him the thinnest slices of ham and brought the hottest kidney; while Uncle John, munching dry toast, reiterated his conviction that Plumpton Osiers would prove a sure find and afford the moral certainty of a run.

Breakfast was a cheerful meal at the Priors, perhaps none the less so that Aunt Emily made a practice of appearing late, although,

on occasions like the present, when she came down in her bonnet, she was apt to make up for lost time by unusual abruptness of manner and brevity of reply

Annie Dennison, n her aunt's absence, sat at one end of the table to make tea. She was very pretty in a riding-habit, with her abundant hair coiled into a silky crown over her brows. Percy on one side, and Miss Blair on the other, observed, with different feelings, how pleasant and bright and fresh she looked.

"No red coat, Mr. Mortimer?" exclaimed Annie, as that gentleman stretched an arm, clad in convict's grey, to reach the toast. "What an insult to Tiptop! I hope you have not dressed yourself so badly because you are going to ride with *me?*"

"The very privilege that makes me regret I didn't bring hunting things," answered Mortimer. "My get-up is even worse, I fear, below the waist. Something between a Low Church bishop and a man going to buy pigs. Don't ask me to bring you anything from the side-table, Miss Dennison."

While he spoke Lexley made his appearance, and finding his usual seat occupied looked wistfully towards an empty place by Miss Blair. His heart failed him, however, and he took a chair opposite with an embarrassment of manner that did not escape so shrewd an observer. Even while she wondered what made Mr. Maxwell late she began to suspect that here was another captive of her bow and spear.

"I hope you slept well and had pleasant dreams, Mr. Lexley," said Annie, who had no idea of resigning any of her regular admirers. "Five minutes ago I could have given you a much stronger cup of tea."

"I never dream," answered the clergyman; then, catching Miss Blair's eye, coloured, made an awkward bow, looked foolish, and spilt his tea; while that lady, who read him like a book, preserved an appearance of complete unconsciousness, as only a woman can.

"I dreamt of Miss Blair's music," said the untruthful Mortimer, who slept like a top, and was little given to visions of fancy by night or

day. "As for Horace, I have no doubt he is dreaming still. You had better send up to him, Mr. Dennison. If he gets the chance, he is quite capable of remaining in bed till the end of the week. Every fellow, you know, has his own particular gifts."

"There is plenty of time," answered Uncle John, looking at his watch. "Nobody need start for half an hour yet. And I *do* believe it is going to clear."

Liberal and encouraging as was the announcement, it caused a general break up. Annie had to adjust her riding-hat, Miss Blair to put on "her things." Mortimer liked to smoke a cigarette before starting, and Lexley went to search the hall for his great coat. Even Mrs. Foster had finished breakfast when Horace Maxwell came down, so he drank his tea *tête-à-tête* with Aunt Emily, and afterwards confided to his friend that "he had a roughish time of it, and would take care not to be late again."

Nevertheless, before the party could get under weigh, there was little time to spare.

Mr. Foster, on his hack, had been gone half an hour; though he would wait for them, of course, it was the one thing of all others that destroyed his equanimity for the day, so the carriages were started with as little delay as possible, and Lexley found himself, to his unspeakable happiness, packed into the waggonette opposite Miss Blair. Their host was a good weather prophet, and he had not even the drawback of holding an umbrella to keep off the rain. Annie Dennison and Mortimer jogged on together: Sweep rather fidgety and troublesome; Tiptop in unruffled composure, as scorning to waste his energies till required for real business. The young lady looked back more than once. Mr. Maxwell, she was afraid, would never find the bridleway across the meadows by himself. She hoped the young horse would carry him safely; he did not always behave as well as he ought.

But Barmecide and his rider were occupied in making each other's acquaintance, and this is the way an intimacy was brought about:

Maxwell, crossing the hall to the stables, peeped into the den where Uncle John wrote his letters, to apologize for having no hunting things—"not even a pair of spurs!" and he glanced down at his drab breeches and black boots; "though perhaps that is all the better—they only tear a horse to pieces if he falls."

So congenial a sentiment sank gratefully in the ears of Uncle John, who loved a hunter as his own child, and could forgive the animal anything if it had but courage.

"Barmecide don't require spurs," said he. "Quite the reverse; as I told you last night, he wants a light hand, but my servants don't know how to bit him. If I were a younger man, I should like him better than anything in the stable."

"Can you give me a hint how to ride him?" asked Horace, with modest deference.

"Yes, I can," answered his good-natured host. "Send him along as if he was your own. Go into every field with the hounds. Don't be afraid—he's as near thoroughbred as possible—he's quite fit to go, and a hard day will do him all the good in the world."

With so liberal a margin to his sailing orders, Horace stalked into the stable-yard, and mounted in the utmost confidence.

The helper who brought out Barmecide was the same the horse had run away with ten days before. He looked up in the rider's face with a broad grin.

"Mind as he does'nt bolt with you, sir," said he. "I've took the curb in as tight as ever it will go; but he's a hard-mouthed one, he is, and if once he gets his head I don't think as a giant would be able to stop him."

"Thank ye, my lad," answered Horace, pulling his stirrups to the right length, while he sidled out of the yard, Barmecide curvetting and passaging in as uncomfortable a manner as could well be imagined.

No sooner was he hidden from sight by an angle of the shrubbery than he leapt lightly down, took the curb off altogether, and put it in his pocket. While doing so, he could not fail to admire the points and beauty of the animal he was going to ride.

"Fifteen three, and a bit," thought Maxwell;

"brown, with tan muzzle; large flat legs; long muscular shoulders; a back like a prize-fighter's; a head like a lady's, and a game wild eye that means facing anything at any pace while hounds are running. I *do* hope we shall have some fun together to-day; for I think I never saw a better looking horse in my life!"

Then he jumped quickly into the saddle, and started at a canter across the Park.

Barmecide, expecting the usual torture from a heavy-handed stable-boy, plunged, reached at his bridle, shook his head violently, and finding his mouth still quite comfortable, bent his neck to lay himself out for a gallop with a snort of approval and delight. Ere the pair arrived at the Lodge they were on the best of terms, and understood each other perfectly.

"You're a flyer!" said Maxwell aloud, as he subsided into a trot, and emerged on the turnpike road.

"Yes, sir," answered the old woman who opened the gate, never doubting but his observation was addressed to herself.

Half a mile further on, he spied Miss Dennison and her companion cantering along a bridle-road, two fields off. Without hesitation he turned from the highway to ride at a fair hunting fence, which his horse jumped beautifully, and clearing a flight of rails out of the next enclosure, joined them in a state of considerable satisfaction and self-confidence.

"How nicely he goes with you!" said Miss Annie, "and how pleased Uncle John will be! Look; you can see Plumpton Bridge now, just at the bend of the brook. The carriages must have got there before us, for I declare Mr. Foster is moving off already."

The three then put their horses into a canter and made for the place of meeting. Barmecide did not go quite so pleasantly in company, and Horace, whose fearlessness was the result of skill, not ignorance, felt he should like his mount better if it would but take example by the calm disciplined courage of old Tiptop.

There was no time to lose. Plumpton Osiers, a flat square willow-bed, of about four

acres, with a dry bank of thorns and brushwood overhanging it on the north side, was the kind of covert that a good fox leaves at short notice. As it lay only half a mile off Plumpton Bridge there was a chance of it's being disturbed by some of the foot people who congregate at a favourite meet, and Mr. Foster always seemed anxious to get his hounds into it as quickly as possible. To draw Plumpton Osiers blank was one of the calamities that haunted his dreams. To-day he appeared in a greater hurry than usual. The change in the weather had been so unexpected, the thaw so sudden, that few regular attendants thought of coming. The carriages from the Priors, two or three squires who lived close at hand, half a dozen farmers, a sporting lawyer, and a horse-breaker, constituted the whole assemblage, and his face relaxed into something like a smile, while he brought his horse alongside of his huntsman, amongst the fawning looks and waving sterns of their favourites.

"It's not such a bad day, after all," said he,

"since it cleared. No sun, no wind ('ware horse, Abigail!), and plenty of wet in the ground. A nice little field, too, and we won't wait to see if any more are coming. Move on, Potter; the sooner we get to work the better.

So Potter, with a good-looking lot at his horse's heels, trotted off to the covert without delay.

Thus it fell out that Miss Dennison and her two cavaliers, followed by a servant, were still a quarter of a mile from the Osiers, when the light note of a young hound, corroborated by the deeper tones of his senior, and by a merry chorus from the pack, proclaimed a "find."

"Don't let us go on!" exclaimed Percy, coming to a sudden halt. "We shall head him, to a certainty; but I think we can't do any harm here."

"If he goes away at the other end, we shall be done!" answered Horace, reining in Barmecide, who showed a great deal of impatience.

"Hush!" said the other, in an awe-stricken

whisper. "Miss Dennison, I beseech you, not a word!"

Maxwell's attention was wholly engrossed by his horse; but Annie, following the direction of Mortimer's eyes, observed the fox travelling straight across the adjoining field.

He was a lengthy, magnificent fellow; of the richest possible brown, with a full white-tipped brush, that made him look twice his natural size. If he saw them behind the thick hedge through which they watched him it did not affect his intentions. He seemed to have made up his mind, and to mean going.

With one glance at Potter's white horse, conspicuous in the distance against the dark back-ground of covert through which he scrambled, Percy put his hand to his mouth for a view-holloa, but lowered it without yielding to temptation. "Better not," he murmured; "they're coming as fast as they can. By Jove, what a scent there is! Hark together, my beauties! There's the horn! Here they are!"

The pack were indeed streaming over the

grass on the line of their fox, with just so much music from those in front as assured the rest it was well worth while to get up to the leaders. Potter, on Whitethorn, was leaping the fence out of the covert. Mr. Foster, followed by the field, came splashing along the water-meadows as fast as he could gallop. It was a stirring moment; everything looked like a run. Tiptop cocked his ears, and began to tremble.

For a minute, Mortimer wavered. He glanced at the fence in front, at the groom behind, at the young lady by his side.

"Don't mind *me*," she said; "I can get on very well with Robert. *Please* don't stay, if you'd rather not!"

"One of us ought to take care of you," answered Percy; and perhaps the glance she directed at his friend, whose eyes were riveted on the hounds, may have decided him, for he added, "I promised Mrs. Dennison I would, and if it don't bore you, I *will*."

"This way then," she exclaimed, shortening her reins; "through the gate and down by

the farm-house. There's a ford in the next field, if they cross the brook. Better come with *us*, Mr. Maxwell," she added, as Horace set Barmecide going, with his head straight for the hounds; "I know that fence, and it's a horror!"

It *was* a horror. High, strong and *hairy;* with an uncertainty, proving to be a wide and deep ditch, on the far side; but the young horse seemed more than willing to face it, and with hounds running hard in the very next field, Horace felt it must be now or never.

"You *are* a hunter!"said he, as Barmecide dropped his hind legs amongst the growers, and landed lightly like a deer, with many a foot to spare. The horse too seemed much delighted with his own performance, and content with the handling of his rider.

"Hold hard, sir!" expostulated Potter, from sheer instinct and force of habit, pounding up the field a hundred yards in his rear, and four times that distance from the pack.

"Hold hard! D——n it all, hold hard!" echoed Foster, close at his huntman's heels;

adding, in a growl to himself, "It's that London chap on old Dennison's five-year old; I trust the double fences about Middleton Lacy will soon settle *him!*"

But the double-fences about Middleton-Lacy, amongst which they found themselves in less than ten minutes, seemed to Barmecide even as beds of roses, wherein it was a pride and pleasure to disport himself. His turn of speed had served him admirably, for in spite of its countless hares, the hounds ran through Lower Plumpton without a turn or check of any description, and the young horse, thoroughly enjoying a line of his own, allowed himself to be ridden at a walk, trot, or gallop, with perfet calm and confidence, according to the requirements of the various obstacles he encountered. To use Maxwell's words, who expatiated freely on his merits the same day after dinner, "he was as bold as a lion, as active as a cat, and as wise as a sheep-dog."

Still the hounds kept streaming on; through Middleton Lacy, past the Lodges at Sludgeley, and so across the undulating pastures and wild

open district that went by the imposing title of Middleton Lordship. The grass rode sound, the fences were easy and far apart. There was no stock in the fields; there were no boys scaring crows, no countrymen spreading manure, no yelping curs joining unbidden in the pursuit, and not a covert within five miles. It was like hunting in Paradise.

"He can't stand long before 'em at this pace," said the M. F. H., coming up with his huntsman as they rode at a light easy fence, over which Barmecide had passed without touching a twig. "They *must* pull him down on this side of Marston, for I'll swear Marston's his point."

"And the main earth open, as likely as not," answered Potter. "Dear, dear, that *would* be a bad job! Hold up, horse!"

Whitethorn *did* hold up, or he would have been on his nose in a blind grip. But though he galloped bravely on, he had already given his rider more than one hint that he would gladly welcome a check, a turn, above all, a second horse.

Relief arrived sooner than might have been expected. Another mile brought them to the old Roman Road. Here a tinker, who had unpacked his donkey, lit his fire in a dry place, and sat down to dinner, headed the fox. The hounds flashed over the scent, checked, made their own forward cast, and lost the line.

Some of the old ones still kept their noses down, and puzzled about the tinker's encampment, but in vain.

We trust that fallacy has long since exploded which denied to a straight rider the qualities of a good sportsman. Horace Maxwell would on no account have jumped *into* the road till the hounds were *out* of it, and had fairly settled to the scent again in the next field. When Potter came up he was off his horse, exerting all his powers of observation for any hint that might be of service to the huntsman.

"They carried it up to the fence," said he; "not a yard further. That white hound has never left this field at all."

"That's old Abigail," observed the master, wondering what sort of a cast his huntsman

would make, inclining to think it would be a bad one.

At this critical moment, to the great disturbance of the tinker's donkey, up came the waggonette—horses, servants, inmates,—all in the wildest excitement and splashed to the eyes.

The coachman at Plumpton Priors had, many years before, been whipper-in with these very hounds when they were kept by old Squire Dennison, now defunct. Incapacitated by an accident for the saddle and the kennel, he had subsided to the harness-room and the box; but he dearly loved the old game still, and it was his boast, that with a pair of galloping horses and a swinging pole *his* ladies could see a run in any part of *his* country as well from *his* waggonette as from their own saddles. Especially did he pride himself on his knowledge of the line foxes were disposed to take from Plumpton Osiers, and he had certainly been successful on the present occasion. Even Aunt Emily condescended to compliment him on his skill, and Mrs. Foster

sagely remarked, that "John," meaning her husband, "had much better have come in the carriage, for she could make him out two fields behind the hounds; and, indeed, there seemed only one gentleman with them at all."

"And that's Mr. Maxwell, on *our* young 'orse," explained the coachman, keenly interested; whereat Miss Blair's eyes brightened, and Lexley thought no woman was ever so beautiful in a dream.

Potter looked about him bewildered. Whitethorn was done to a turn. He seemed quite at a loss to guess what had become of his fox, and cast his hounds rather helplessly over the ground they had already made good. This feeble measure prolonged the check and enabled his second horse to arrive, not a moment too soon, closely followed by Annie Dennison and her cavalier.

Loud were the shouts that welcomed them from the waggonette, and the party were talking at the top of their voices, when a little suppressed cry from Miss Blair, who turned very white, directed the attention of all to

Maxwell, on his face in the Roman Road, with Barmecide lying across him.

His downfall had been brought about in this wise. Abigail, a discreet and matronly old hound, with a confidence in her own sagacity but one degree removed from the enormity of "skirting," had been making independent inquiries for herself with a diligence that could not but prove successful. Her short sharp notes soon brought the rest of the pack to share in her discoveries; and as they all settled once more to the line, Potter was unable to forbear a cheer, while he waved his cap to her with a "Yooi! At him! Well done, old lady! I'd trust ye with a man's life."

Now Maxwell had no prejudice about young horses, his practice having taught him that when ridden resolutely up to hounds, they were as temperate and sagacious as their seniors, with perhaps a turn more courage, the result of inexperience; but he was apt to forget that they should be treated *as* young horses, and not asked to engage in complicated transactions at too short notice.

With Abigail's first proclamation that her fox, though diverted from his line, was still forward and resolved to make his point, the dismounted enthusiast, vaulting into the saddle, turned short at the blind straggling fence which bounded the Roman Road, with a loose rein and a dashing carelessness that Tiptop, who was looking on, would probably have resented by a refusal, but poor Barmecide accepted with a fall.

The horse had no time to collect himself before he was caught in a wilderness of ragged, tangled branches, that pulled him down into the blind, bramble-covered ditch ; and though, even at such disadvantage, he made a gallant effort to land himself and his rider in the road, it was but to flounder through a succession of deep treacherous ruts that brought him first on his head and finally on his back, with Maxwell, who sat as close as wax, completely under him. A worse rider and a clumsier horse would, in all probability, have escaped with an easier fall.

Happily help was at hand. While the

ladies trembled and burst out crying, Mortimer threw himself from the saddle, flung his rein to Annie, and rushed in to the rescue of his friend. The footman too was off the box and over his gaiters in mire with a rapidity that did him infinite credit.

These scenes are all much alike. Muddy up-turned girths and stomach; bright horse-shoes kicking in the air; white breeches flashing round the fallen; a pale face peering from beneath the saddle-flaps, with a strange, uncomfortable stare that belies its brave attempt to smile; horsemen standing in their stirrups to give directions, holding the bridles of others dismounted, and gathering in to hinder or assist; a rally—a rush—a scatter—and then, scared and snorting, a horse rises out of the midst, to give himself a frightened shake, while a prostrate rider is dragged from the vicinity of his heels, more or less damaged, as the case may be.

"What is it, Mr. Mortimer?" exclaimed Annie, who was crying, as out of the rally aforesaid Percy staggered back and would

have fallen, but that he caught by the splash-board of the waggonette.

"Nothing," answered Percy, grinding his teeth; "the brute kicked me getting up; that's all. I hope Horace isn't as much hurt as we thought."

But Horace, with a crushed hat and torn coat, a mass of mud from head to foot, was already in the saddle and looking which way the hounds had gone, having re-assured the ladies, who were extremely anxious to make room for him in the waggonette, by declaring that he was not the least injured, rather the contrary.

"Only the wind knocked out of me, honour bright. And it was entirely my own fault. Thank you, Miss Blair; but, indeed I am only dirty. I haven't really got a scratch."

Then looking hastily round, to throw his friend a word of thanks for the prompt assistance that, perhaps, had saved his life, he leaped once more to the ground, with an exclamation that was almost an oath.

"Help! —somebody—everybody!" said he

catching the other in his arms. "Here's Mortimer fainting—a thing he never did in his life!"

Percy, sick and white, repudiated the accusation, and tried to get on his horse. Failing flagrantly, he begged everybody to go on, expressing a conviction, as he seated himself in the mud, that if they left the groom with him, and Maxwell would take care of Miss Dennison, he should be all right in ten minutes, and able to jog home. Then his head drooped, and he turned faint again from sheer pain.

In such an emergency it was Miss Blair's nature to assume the command.

"Ride back directly, Robert," said she addressing the groom, but with a glance of inquiry at Miss Dennison. "You must find the other carriage in the turnpike road, say what has happened, and bring it on at once. We had better all get out, except Mrs. Dennison, and wait for it; then there will be plenty of room for Mr. Mortimer, and he must be driven straight home. Mr. Maxwell, you must ride back through Middleton, and call

at the doctor's house, opposite the inn, red brick—you can't mistake it—with a green railing. Tell him to come on directly. Turn to the right when you get out of the lane, and keep the turnpike-road. Middleton is three miles."

"If the doctor's not at home?" asked Maxwell.

"Tell the assistant to come instead. He's rather the best of the two. I am *so* glad you were not hurt!"

Lexley knew already why these last few words, spoken low and quick, made him wince with a strange sensation that was akin to pain.

Aunt Emily, trying to look as if she had originated these directions herself, called Horace back as he was putting his horse into a canter.

"If you can meet Mr. Dennison," said she, "tell him what has happened, and impress on him that he ought to come home without delay. It's very odd, my dear," turning to Annie, "but your uncle is sure to be

miles out of the way when I want his advice."

"Which you never take," thought Annie, but wisely held her tongue.

So Mortimer was lifted into the waggonette in defiance of his protestations. Not unwillingly, after all; for though he made light of the casualty, he had learned enough of surgery in his adventurous life, to be pretty sure his leg was broken above the ancle. Annie Dennison felt bound to accompany him, and her aunt, whose kindness of heart could be evoked by real suffering, arranged the cushions for his comfort with considerable ingenuity; the footman also, not without misgivings he would have perished rather than reveal, volunteered to bring the two riderless horses home. Altogether, as the sufferer himself observed, with a ghastly smile, "No fellow ever was so well picked up, and he only regretted that his unlucky accident should have prevented them all seeing the end of the run."

As it would be hopeless to expect anything

but the most abridged account from Mr. Foster, who returned to dinner, it may not be irrelevant here to record the day's "doings" of his celebrated hounds and the select few, Nokes, Stokes, and half a dozen others, who were with them.

Abigail, having hit off the line by her own unassisted endeavours some hundred yards from where any of the rest had thought of trying, guided the pack for at least two miles over a tract of bad scenting ground, till they found themselves in the pastures above Spinnithorne. Here, in consequence of the loss of time, for which the tinker in the Roman Road was answerable, another check ensued, which might have proved fatal, but that Foster, with an eye like a hawk, viewed the fox stealing through an orchard belonging to that Miss Lovelace whose claims for dead poultry it was the business of his life to assuage. Potter, riding a fresh horse, capped them on quicker than usual, and had the satisfaction of seeing his hounds race across three or four large enclosures, turn short

down the side of a double hedgerow, and run fairly into their fox at the bottom of a deep dry ditch that surrounded a plantation on Mr. Screwman's farm, full of rabbit burrows, many of which were of a size that might afford sanctuary to a wolf.

"Who—whoop! Tear him, old bitch!" he exclaimed, throwing himself from his horse and diving for the carcase, on which Abigail had fastened with most tenacious fangs. "You'll have *your* share, whoever goes without. Who—whoop!" he added, cutting off mask, brush and pads, while he looked up in Foster's grim face, now radiant with delight.

"An old dog-fox, sir, and as tough as shoe-leather. It's a good job he didn't get in among them there rabbit-spouts afore they had hold on him. Worry, worry, worry! Here puppies! Vaulter! Vanity! Dexterous! Worry—worry—worry! Who—Whoop!"

And Mr. Foster entered the day's sport in his diary with an emphatic "*Good*," as fifty minutes—two checks—a seven mile point—and a kill in the open; while Farmer Moun-

tain, who weighed eighteen stone, and stuck to the high road like a man, thereby arriving before the remnants of the fox had entirely disappeared, swore it was the best gallop he ever saw in his life.

CHAPTER VI.

MAN-EATERS.

After a storm comes a calm. It is a fortnight since the good run from Plumpton Osiers, and in less than an hour the gong will sound for luncheon at the Priors. Meantime peace and quiet pervade the blue drawing-room in which Percy Mortimer and his broken leg are established. The Middleton doctor has "reduced the fracture," as he calls it; a process the sufferer renders by the expression "spliced it where it was sprung;" the bone is knitting, and the patient going on favourably. Indeed, Percy, as he often boasts, is an excellent subject for surgical operations. His constitution is healthy, his temperament easy and

somewhat lethargic. He posseses plenty of courage, and derives a certain amusement from such experiments as those to which he is now subjected, even when made on his own person. He has lived in so many strange scenes and places, has so often been prostrated by accident or illness—with a screen of branches for a roof, a tattered blanket and weather-worn saddle for bedding, and an Indian squaw or a swarthy Affghan for nurse—that to be laid up in this luxurious drawing-room, with books and newspapers at hand, hot-house flowers on the table, and every female creature in the house his devoted slave, seems a positive luxury and delight.

His eye travels lazily round till it rests on the figure of Annie Dennison, drawing at the window, but looking up every now and then with a dreamy, abstracted air, suggestive of her occupation, and by no means unbecoming to a pretty woman.

It has just struck him that to have such a companion about one every day, even when no longer held by the leg on a drawing-room

sofa, might be worth the sacrifice of many bachelor comforts and pleasures, which no man is better able to appreciate, and of which no man in his time has made better use.

Physical pain, especially when borne without complaint, seldom fails to win a woman's sympathies and excite her interest. Annie established herself from the first as head nurse to Mr. Mortimer, and in a very few days it seemed the most natural thing in the world that his sofa should be wheeled into the blue drawing-room, and that he should spend the morning *tête-à-tête* with Miss Dennison.

Far be it from me to profess dissent from any article of faith cherished by that order of fire-worshippers who scorch, if they do not entirely consume, their own hearts on an altar of self-immolation. No doubt the true believer "drags at each remove a lengthening chain." No doubt "absence" (if not too prolonged) "makes the heart grow fonder," and the ideal reigns perhaps most triumphantly when there is nothing present to destroy his or her ideality. But *Gutta cavat lapidem:*

constant dropping wears away a stone; constant flirtation saps the character while it deteriorates the brain. Repeated confidences kindle into sympathy—the tow and tinder of which men and women are proverbially composed, only wait a chance spark, a rising breeze, to become a bonfire, and propinquity is perhaps the most combustible ingredient of all. Then, even if the heart remain steady, the fancy is sadly apt to stray, and one step at least is taken on that downward path which runs in a steeper incline at every inch, and hurries us, before we know where we are, to the very bottom of the hill.

Percy Mortimer always boasted that he could stop and put on the drag-chain whenever he chose. He had often been in love, but never, as yet, with only one woman at a a time; and believed himself, as he was believed by his friends, to be incapable of committing what he and they considered the crowning imprudence of matrimony. His mother, his aunts, all his female relations, persistently recommended the institution, even

while they were prepared to revile and vituperate any lady who should propose herself as a candidate for its advantages, and professed themselves, as no doubt they felt, eager to receive "dear Percy's" wife with open arms—an expression best understood by those who have had most experience of the cordiality that exists between relations by marriage.

But "dear Percy" did not see it. He got on very well as he was—could tolerate his own society better than that of people who bored him, liked his own way, his own pursuits and amusements, his own friends, married and single, his horses, his cigar—above all, his liberty. To-day, for the first time, he began to think there might be something in life better than all these.

"Turn your head a little towards the fireplace, Mr. Mortimer," said Annie, from the window. "I've rubbed your nose out three times, and a very provoking nose it is. Never mind! don't move, if it hurts you, *please*."

"Most certainly *not!*" answered Percy, laughing. "But turning one's head does not

necessarily give one a pain in the leg. Will that do? Make a good nose of it, Miss Dennison—art should be nature idealized, not copied. On the aquiline, if you please, as much as possible, and off the snub. Have you done the tiger?"

"I'm coming to him directly I've straightened your nose," said the artist, whose talent lay chiefly in caricature. "But was it a *true* story, Mr. Mortimer?" Uncle John made my blood run cold when he described how the creature stood over you waving its cruel tail like a cat with a mouse. Poor mouse! What a moment it must have been! Tell me all about it from beginning to end. I shall draw it as well again if you do."

"There's not much to tell, only the mouse had a squeak for it. Do you know what a *shekarry* is?"

"Not the least. The only Indian word I know is *bungalow*, and I haven't an idea what it means. Now I've begun the tiger's back. How do their stripes go? The long way of the skirt, or across it? Don't move your

head. Tell me exactly how it happened, without any Indian words, whilst I finish his tail."

"Well, I was at a station—never mind where—what we call up country, staying with a very good fellow, an indigo-planter with one eye. Did you ever see an indigo-planter? No? Well, you've seen a fellow with one eye, and that's near enough. One day, after *tiffin*—"

"Stop. What's '*tiffin*'? Don't say that again."

"After luncheon, then, a native made his appearance in a state of dismay and trepidation, to tell us that his relatives, his belongings, his entire village, were in terror of their lives from the depredations of a man-eater."

"That's an Indian word, I'm sure. Don't take your eyes off the chimney-piece, and confine your narrative to plain English."

"Man-eater *is* plain English; I've seen lots of them in London, and elsewhere, with striped dresses, and other tiger-like qualifications. For fifteen miles round, it seemed

the beast kept everybody in alarm, and, according to the native's account, had eaten within the month seven children, a water-carrier, and a tough old Hindoo woman, the speaker's grandmother. My friend, who was drinking brandy *paw*—brandy-and-water, I mean—thought the story probable enough, and in short, being a resolute fellow, determined to lie in wait at a certain spot the beast frequented, next morning at daybreak, and keep his eyes open."

"His *one* eye open, if you please," interposed the young lady. "I'm sketching him doing it. If this improbable story really be true, let us have the truth, the whole truth, and nothing *but* the truth, Mr. Mortimer."

"You must draw him with a good deal of stomach then, and very thin legs," continued Percy; "and the eye that *is* open ought to be as sharp as a needle. He made all his arrangements over night, ordered everything to be ready—guns, fellows to carry them, an elephant to take us to the ground, etc., and at four in the morning we settled comfortably

to our coffee, for of course I said I'd go with him."

"Of course you did, and I think it was very foolish—no, I don't! I think you were quite right."

"'Can you draw a bead?' said my friend as soon as we got fairly under weigh. 'You must shoot to an inch, when you go out to kill a tiger on foot. He's not like a pheasant in Norfolk, you know. If you're at all uncertain, you had better remain with the elephant. I should be sorry for you to risk your life in the kind of sport we are likely to have to-day.'

"Of course I swore I could shoot like Colonel Ross, and so, though I was in a *blue* funk, I resolved to do my best, and put a bold face on it, while the elephant tramped steadily on."

"Had the elephant tusks?" interrupted Miss Annie. "I'm putting it in the background."

"Tusks! Of course it had, and horns too," answered Percy, laughing. "Well, Miss

Dennison, you'll hardly believe it, but no sooner were we in sight of the *tope*—the clump of trees that was to guide us—than we came upon the beast's track, printed off quite fresh in the clay, by a water spring. We had no doubt then of his size, or the shape of his claws. My friend's one eye blazed like a lamp.

"'We'll get down here,' said he, 'and leave the elephant to take us back again.' I only hoped the elephant's load might not be lightened for its homeward journey.

"We placed ourselves in a narrow pass, such as you would almost call a 'ride' in a woodland here, waiting till the beaters should have driven up to us. Notwithstanding the diabolical row they made, I swear I could hear my heart beat. The indigo-planter, however, seemed as cool as was compatible with a temperature of 90° Fahrenheit in the shade."

Miss Dennison had laid her pencils down and was looking at him, as Desdemona (before marriage) looked at Othello.

"Presently I felt his hand on my shoulder. 'Right in front of you,' he whispered. 'Twenty yards, not an inch farther. You'll see his head when he moves.'

"But when you come to paint that masterly sketch, Miss Dennison, please don't forget that a tiger's dress, as you call it, matches in colour the jungle he frequents. In the gaudy tawny and orange hues that surrounded me I could make out nothing, positively nothing, till I fancied the reeds began to shake.

"'Steady,' whispered one-eye, who was born a Scotchman, and under strong excitement spoke the language still. 'Tak' time man! Now! give it him.'

"Whether it was the noise the beaters made, or the roar of the animal, or both combined, I cannot say, but such a fearful row I never heard in my life as at that moment. The reeds seemed to divide of themselves and out rushed a beast as big as a donkey, making straight towards me, with a sleek round head as broad as a bull's.

"I took the best aim I could at his mouth,

and let him have an eleven-bore ball crash into the very middle of it."

"Oh, Mr. Dennison! How could you?"

"How *couldn't* I, you mean. Instead of his tumbling headlong at my feet, as I fully expected, I heard a rush and singing in my ears, a long dark body seemed to shoot between me and the sun. I felt something like an electric shock, only stronger, and I found myself half stunned, half paralysed, but not so frightened as I should have thought, lying on my back, with a wide hairy chest astride over mine, and a ton of weight driving spikes through my left arm as it pinned me to the ground.

"He said I didn't faint; but the next thing I remember was my friend giving me brandy, and the tiger stretched out stone dead, three or four yards off. What really happened was this. When the beast came at me out of the jungle I shot him, as I meant to do, in a vital place; but I fancy I must have aimed an inch too low, for I only broke his jaw. In two bounds he was on me, and if I had been alone,

why, I should never have inflicted on you so long a story in this pretty drawing-room. But the indigo-planter was as cool a hand and as good a sportsman as ever sat in a howdah. He knew the nature of the beast was so far cat-like that it would gloat for an instant over its victim before dealing the fatal buffet, and of that instant he took advantage. With a deliberate and deadly aim he finished it up by a double shot through the spine. There was not a moment to spare, and, as I said before, I think you must allow the mouse had a squeak for it."

Annie felt more interested than she cared to own, so applied herself sedulously to her drawing, while she asked,

"And what became of the Hindoo—the person whose grandmother was eaten by the tiger."

"The Hindoo was like other Hindoos, very grateful and demonstrative, with a shade of polite insincerity. His ideas on the subject of tigers, as I gathered from my friend, were most remarkable. Had the last shot not killed

the tiger, in which case the tiger must assuredly have killed me, nothing would have persuaded this intelligent native but that my spirit was destined to accompany the animal in its excursions, and assist it to obtain its prey. Fancy *me*, disembodied, if you can, leading a tiger about in a leash, like Una with the lion! That *would* be a subject for a sketch—Miss Dennison, won't you try it?"

Annie shook her head. "I don't like joking about these horrors," said she; "but you can't mean that the natives seriously believe such absurdities?"

"I will only tell you what the old gentleman positively assured us happened in his own case, some years before. His eldest son had been killed by a tiger, and partly eaten, when the brute was disturbed, and driven away from its meal. The father, armed with a rusty matchlock, as long as himself, climbed into a tree at night, resolved to watch the body, and have a shot at the beast, when it returned, as it certainly would, for another supper off his boy. He had not long to wait. The tiger stole out

of the jungle, and came gliding into the moonlight, when, just as the weapon covered a vital spot, he whisked round, and slipped into the covert again. The corpse, sitting upright, was nodding at the tree on which the avenger had perched himself, and its friendly warning had not been in vain. The Hindoo then came down and fastened the boy's body to the ground. Again he watched, and again the tiger made his appearance, but one of the corpse's hands was free, and that hand pointed faithfully towards the post of danger, with the same result as before. The undefeated old gentleman came down, nevertheless, once more, and pinned his boy's body secure to the earth, so that it could not move a limb. His patience and perseverance were rewarded. The tiger emerged a third time, and finished a hasty morsel with an ounce of lead in his brain. The man stuck to the truth of his story with the utmost confidence. A great English *sahib* had bought the tiger's skin, and it was well known in Mysore and the adjacent districts that such was the nature of the man-eater and

the destiny of his victim. Miss Dennison, have you finished your sketch?"

"I should like to have seen all you have, Mr. Mortimer," said the young lady, colouring her tiger with some sepia and the feather-end of a pen. "Gentlemen have a great advantage over ladies. They go about the world seeing and doing things, while we can only sit at home and—draw."

He looked up. The last word was not quite what he expected. Her head was bent over her colour-box, and he could not help thinking what a beautiful sketch she herself would make in that attitude, if only she could be transferred to card-board or canvas. Something whispered, "Why not become possessor of the original? You have money; you are neither old nor ugly; your manners are pleasant; your position undeniable. Surely you have only got to ask and have." But perhaps the assumed facility of the transaction lessened its charm, and Percy felt he was not yet so far gone but that he could balance calmly the *pros* and *cons* of that irrevocable

plunge, which for the first time in his life he contemplated the possibility of making.

She little thought what a push she gave him towards the brink by her innocent question, asked, nevertheless, with a faint increase of colour in her cheek:

"Do you know if Mr. Maxwell is expected to-day? He said he should come down again to see how you were getting on."

Now Horace Maxwell, who remained at the Priors to watch his friend's recovery for nearly a week after the accident of which he was the innocent cause, had carried with him to London the good wishes of everybody in the house. Even Aunt Emily declared that he showed more feeling than she could have expected from any young man of the present day, while the skill with which he rode Barmecide up to their joint catastrophe, constituted him a prime favourite with Uncle John. Miss Blair had been prepared to like him from the first, and the conviction that her influence over him was less than she expected, in no way decreased her partiality. She had never before any

difficulty in such matters, but here was one with whom she began swimmingly, and never advanced a step. She reflected, she wondered, she watched. She could not make out whether he was taken by Miss Dennison or not.

And Annie, who asked herself the very same question, had decided, with more prudence than young ladies generally possess, that it must never be answered, one way or the other. Mr. Maxwell was *nice*, no doubt. None of her partners or male friends had ever been so nice. More of a man of the world than Lexley, who besides had become very odd and altered of late. Better looking than Mortimer, and altogether, as it seemed to her, belonging to a different class of beings from honest Nokes and Stokes, gone back to duty in their barracks. But he was not a marrying man. Some instinct, usually dormant in the breast of woman till she becomes a chaperon, had warned Annie that his pleasant glances, his bright smiles, were simply the frank tribute of one who had nothing else to offer. She did not forget an occasion when she found him in the billiard-

room, holding a confidential conversation with Miss Blair. They changed colour, she was sure, when she opened the door. Miss Dennison was not much given to analysing her feelings, or she might have felt alarmed at certain pangs of jealousy occasioned by the confusion of the gentleman, and the disinclination she felt afterwards for the society of the lady.

Still, though one never means, and don't even want, to marry a man, one can appreciate his good qualities, be glad that he should visit one, and ask his friend, not without a blush, when one is likely to see him again.

"He talked of to-day," answered Percy, moving his sound leg uneasily on the sofa; "but that's no reason he should come. People cannot tear themselves away from the delights of London. Look at the Pikes—promised faithfully, threw everybody over, and never appeared at all."

"You say that on purpose to make me angry," exclaimed Annie, "You know that she is my dearest friend, and the General is

simply my idol. But how could they come when baby was ill? It is brutal to think of it."

"Babies never *ought* to be ill," was his answer. "They never are, when properly brought up. Look at savages: I lived with a tribe once who turned the children out of their lodges directly they were weaned. The weakly died off, the strong grew up, and everybody was satisfied. Don't go, Miss Dennison, I'm not such an ogre as you think."

"I *must* go," replied Annie; "but I'll tidy you up first. Luncheon will be ready in five minutes, and most of the sepia for your tiger's stripes has come off on my hands. Yes, I don't mind showing you the sketch, but you must promise not to bounce about and fidget with the sofa-cushions. You're not nearly so good a patient as you were, Mr. Mortimer. I suppose that means you are getting better."

"It means I have too kind a nurse," replied Percy, looking gratefully in the girl's face, while she put her half-finished sketch into his hand.

"I'll do it," he thought, "hang me if I

won't!" Then he reflected on the great disadvantage at which a suitor is placed when fastened down to a sofa by a broken leg. Had the lady been a person of experience—a widow, for instance, or a London girl of many seasons' practice, or even Miss Blair, as he had lately learned to call her—the helplessness of his attitude would have been rather in his favour. Through all natures seems to prevail the law of mechanics, that "action and reaction are equal and contrary." In love and in business alike, each seems prepared to advance in proportion as the other recedes, until some imaginary line is reached at which people come to an understanding and conclude the transaction. But such mutual accomodation can only be calculated with certainty when both are experienced dealers, well acquainted with the value of their wares. In the present instance Percy thought it more than probable that anything like a premature declaration would put Miss Dennison to a flight he would be powerless to check by the exercise of certain gentle yet resolute measures

that his experience taught him produced very soothing results. To be left on a sofa, with a half-finished offer on his lips, that could only be completed at a young lady's pleasure, when, where, and how she would? Not if he knew it! Into so thoroughly false a position Mortimer would be the last man on earth to blunder; and so, instead of seizing the pretty hand that held the sketch and pressing it to his lips, he contented himself with a kindly glance into the pretty face, and a request that he might become the proud possessor of the picture when complete.

"I don't know," said Annie. "You'll hang it up somewhere, and laugh at it with your bachelor-friends."

"On the contrary, I shall keep it under lock and key, in a portfolio, and only look at it when I feel I want taking down a peg. You are strong in caricature, Miss Dennison, but you are *not* merciful. Am I really so ugly as that?"

"India is very unbecoming, I have been told," answered Annie, demurely. "I never

saw you there, you know, so I have drawn on my imagination."

"And drawn *from* it to some purpose, it seems. Well, it's lucky we cannot see ourselves as others see us. The tiger is capital. Is he drawn from the imagination too?"

"Oh! no. I've seen *him* at the Zoological."

"Why don't you see *me* at the Zoological? I know all the keepers, and a good many of the beasts. Won't you come to the Zoo with me, some day, when we get back to London?"

"I don't know," said Annie, again. "I must really go and wash my hands now. The gong will sound in five minutes."

"First tell me who that is coming up the avenue. I can just see a hat between the cedars."

He seemed desirous to prolong the conversation. It was so pleasant to have her there all to himself. In the afternoon, of course, she would go out walking, or riding, or driving; and their *tête-à-tête* would be broken up for the rest of the day.

"It's Mr. Lexley," answered Annie. "He

often comes to luncheon now, and walks the whole way—eleven miles! Mr. Mortimer, do *you* know—"

"Do I know *what?*"

"It's very ridiculous, of course, but I can't help thinking that Mr. Lexley is rather inclined to—to like somebody *here.*"

"Meaning Miss Dennison?"

She flushed up. "Not meaning Miss Dennison the least. Somebody very different from Miss Dennison."

"You can't mean *Mrs.* Dennison!" he exclaimed, raising his eyebrows in affected horror. "And a clergyman, too! How shocking!"

"I am serious," she answered, though she could not help laughing; "which *you* never are for five minutes, even with a broken leg. Of course he likes Aunt Emily and all of us very much, but I don't fancy he would walk two and twenty miles, between breakfast and dinner, to see anybody on earth but Miss Blair. Mr. Mortimer, I am convinced you can tell me—who *is* Miss Blair?"

She did not fail to notice his embarrassment,

and the lame way in which he tried to evade her question.

"A friend of your aunt's, I fancy. A very old friend of Mrs. Dennison; that is why she is here so much."

"But you have known her a long time. She said so herself, the night before last."

"I have met her abroad."

"Where?"

He escaped into generalities. "Oh! everywhere abroad. She's been knocking about over the whole of abroad, and so have I."

"Was she in society! I don't mean in China or the Sandwich Islands, or any of those out-of-the-way places, but in Paris and Vienna and Cannes?"

"Oh! yes; I believe so. But I am not a very good judge; I have never thought much about her. I dare say you have formed your own opinion, and it's far more likely to be right than mine."

"I dare say I have," replied Annie, looking thoughtfully at her sketch. "*My* opinion is that she's a man-eater! There! What shall I send you in for luncheon?"

CHAPTER VII.

SEEKING REST.

ELEVEN miles, heel and toe, through every variety of scenery, by breezy common, woodland path, devious bridle-road, and bottomless by-lane, ought to give anybody an appetite; yet it was remarked, even by the servants who waited, that when Mr. Lexley came to luncheon at the Priors he ate less than the most delicate lady who sat at table. The truth is, Lexley was hit; hard hit as a man is once in a lifetime; he gets over it, and perhaps when the wound is healed, it has done him no great harm, though we may be sure it has taught him not to "jest at scars"; but, in the meantime, he becomes an object of pity, or of

envy, according to the creed we hold. Who would not wish his faculties to be so sharpened that the mere sigh of a breeze thrills like music to his heart—the very scent of a flower rises like intoxication to his brain? But at the same time, who would wish his happiness to be so dependent on the caprices of another, that a word, a look, a gesture, perhaps unintentional, have power to inflict on him nights of wakefulness and days of woe? It is good to take life as it comes, shrinking in no way from its responsibilities, accepting its pleasures, setting our teeth against its pains; but there *is* a cup at which the wise man is content to wet his lips and so put it down, knowing better than to drain it, for surely *plus aloes quam mellis habet.* Liquid fire and bitter poison are in its dregs.

The first night he had ever seen her, the night he heard her play, Algernon Lexley told himself that here was the woman who for him could make earth a paradise. The next two days only convinced him that without her life must henceforth be a blank, and that to win

her no sacrifice would be too costly, no price too high. When he had been twenty-four hours in his parsonage a reaction set in. How should a mere country curate, he thought, aspire to such a paragon as this? Everybody in like plight has felt with Helena—

> "It were all one
> As I should love a bright particular star
> And think to wed it."

And surely it is better so. Youth is the period of illusion and of effort. There is plenty of time in after life to find out that the "particular star" is a farthing rushlight, and that *le jeu ne vaut pas la chandelle.*

Algernon Lexley struggled hard for a day and a night; read Greek; dug in his garden; visited every old woman in the parish; and walked after dinner in the dark so far and so fast that he went to bed and slept sound for sheer weariness. Next morning he felt in better spirits, but more in love than ever. That day and many days after, scarcely at decorous intervals, he found himself dropping

in to luncheon at the Priors—to get the character of a village school-mistress, to ask Aunt Emily the price of her church harmonium, to consult works of divinity in Uncle John's library, more than once without any excuse at all. Each time he went full of hope; each time he returned despondent and self-abased, smarting under the fear that he had been ridiculous, stung by misgivings as to his dress, his manners, his personal appearance; tortured by a thousand unreal doubts and causeless anxieties, while he extracted with perverse ingenuity matter for sorrow, resentment, despair, from the common greetings of politeness, the established usages of society. Altogether he was in a most uncomfortable state, attributed by himself to the charms of Miss Blair, though perhaps the student of human nature would have considered her merely as a vehicle for the imparting of a disease to which the young man's system was predisposed. Had she stayed away a little longer he would probably have taken to worship Miss Dennison; but there is a fatality

in these things, and he became a fool about Laura Blair. Look at him now, and say if it is not a pity. A spare athletic figure coming up the avenue with swift strides, that decrease visibly in speed and scope as they approach the house. Eleven miles from door to door, and it is scarcely two hours and a half since he left his own; yet, until he came in sight of those windows his breath had never quickened, nor had a drop of moisture risen on his brow. Without being handsome, it is a prepossessing face, white and anxious though it has turned in the last minute. The dark eyes show fire, energy, and an immensity of faith. There is ideality in the brow; firmness in the jaw, with its full black whiskers; and in the thin, clean-shaved, flexible lips a sad capability of suffering, that can be kept down and hidden beneath a smile.

He does not look like a man deficient in courage, yet he wavers, as cowards do, and comes on with a rush at the last moment to ring the door-bell.

"Is Miss—Mrs. Dennison at home?" says

he, in a shaking voice, while he envies the cool self-respect of the footman who confronts him.

"Luncheon is just gone in," replies that functionary, who dined comfortably an hour ago. "Will you please to step this way, sir?"

This way means straight into the dining-room, and he is fast losing his head. The old squire, in scarlet coat and hunting cap, seems to reel and waver on the canvas as if he was alive and inebriated.

Mrs. Dennison receives him coldly. That is her way, and discourages him only a little; he shakes hands with her, nevertheless, with Annie, with the rector's daughters, with their brother from Marlborough College, whom he never met before; lastly, with Miss Blair, whom he has seen, though he dared not look at her, ever since he came into the room.

Did she, or did she not, return the pressure of his clasp ever such a little? He fancies she did, and immediately his eye brightens, his courage rises, his colour returns. He becomes, on the instant, a bolder, bigger, and a hand-

somer man. She continues to eat her chicken, pale, unmoved, beautiful, like the goddess of night. Will she ever eat chickens roasted in his kitchen, carved at his table? If he could but summon up courage he would ask her this afternoon.

The malady is intermittent. He was in the hot fit now; the cold would follow in due course. There fell a silence while the butler offered him sherry. He *must* say something, so "he hoped Mr. Dennison was well. He had come over to see him about their road rate."

"And walked all the way?" asked Annie, who knew he did, but whom some imp of mischief prompted to assume the aggressive.

"All the way, Miss Dennison," he replied. "It's not very far—scarcely eleven miles, and through a beautiful country. I like the walk so much."

Miss Blair happened to look up, and their eyes met. Annie felt provoked. She admitted it afterwards, and inclined to be spiteful with both.

"Uncle John ought to be very much flattered," said she. "Dear old thing! I wonder if anybody else would walk eleven miles to see him, or if he is *really* the great attraction here?"

Lexley turned scarlet. Miss Blair pitied him from her heart. She knew he was enduring martyrdom for her sake, and would have borne her share willingly if she could. Poor fellow! how gentle he was, how inexacting, and how true! Would that other man, amusing himself in London, walk eleven miles and back, only to say, 'How d'ye do?' Not he! What a pity they were so unlike! In the meantime she advanced gallantly in support. "Dear Miss Dennison, you are forgetting another attraction in the next room. While we are saying pleasant things to each other, Mr. Mortimer is perishing with hunger. I thought *you* had established yourself as his nurse, for good and all."

Miss Blair had a quiet, incisive way of speaking that caused every syllable to ring clear and distinct, like the high notes of a pianoforte.

Annie coloured and bit her lip. "Somebody must take care of him," said she, "and of course it's lonely for him now. Every one seemed attentive enough while Mr. Maxwell remained."

The return was fairly intended. Miss Blair had indeed shown greater commiseration for the sufferer, had frequented the blue drawing-room more assiduously, so long as it was enlivened by the presence of his friend.

"Well, he's coming back to-day," she replied, with provoking calmness, as if it were a law of nature that she should know and regulate his movements.

Annie had lost her temper, and forgotten her manners.

"Who told you so?" said she. "Has he been writing to you? I dare say he *has!*"

Lexley felt very uncomfortable. Could his idol then be carrying on a correspondence with another? and that other such a rival as his old schoolfellow, whom, however, he had never before considered dangerous as a ladies' man. In a second flashed on his brain the programme

of his future, dating from that very afternoon. An authorized interview—for diffidence would henceforth be swamped in despair—with the mistress of his destiny—an avowal of life-long adoration, in spite of her confession that she was promised elsewhere—an eternal farewell—a letter to the Bishop, resigning his preferment, and a few short years of hardship, labour, and adventure amongst the Feejee Islanders, (to whose chiefs, by the way, Mr. Mortimer could give him plenty of introductions), or other the most inconvertible of the heathen, to conclude with an early death and a missionary's unknown grave. These cheerful anticipations were interrupted by the harsh voice of Aunt Emily, who, watching her opportunity, was not sorry for an occasion of snubbing her niece.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Annie. If Mr. Maxwell had altered his plans he would have written to me, certainly not to Miss Blair, and I should hope not to you. Young ladies say such odd things in these days. I never can make out whether they are lamentably bold, or only lamentably silly."

"Hope for the best, aunt," replied Miss Dennison, whose ill humours never lasted above a minute. "I'd rather be bold than silly. In the meantime, I shall take Mr. Mortimer his chicken. Thanks, Miss Blair, he likes it smothered in bread sauce."

And as the getting up of a single partridge causes the whole covey to rise, a general move was the result of Annie's disappearance on her benevolent errand.

At this juncture did Aunt Emily win the young clergyman's eternal gratitude and good-will. "If you want to see the harmonium," said she, "it's in the Sunday-school. The school-room's locked, and the shoemaker has the keys. You'll never find his house if you don't know it, but Laura talked of going into the village this afternoon, and I dare say she will be good enough to show you the way. If you have anything to say to Mr. Dennison you'd better come back to tea."

So in less than ten minutes he was pacing a garden walk between the laurels, side by side with Laura Blair.

He was no fool, though foolishly in love. As he took in with a side glance the enchanting figure of his companion he could not but admit that from the saucy feather in her little perched-up hat, to the tips of her neat walking boots, she was very different from his ideal of a clergyman's wife. Right or wrong, it only made him more determined to win her. No other woman surely was steeped in such an atmosphere of beauty—no other woman's gloves fitted so well; and he had never yet seen lockets and bracelets so becoming to the wearer. For him she seemed, as the Frenchman said, *plus femme que les autres.* That made the whole secret. His own difficulty was how to begin.

They walked on in silence. She, too, revolved many things in her mind. It is not to be supposed that she was blind to such devotion as even a school girl must have detected; and, like all women who have been accustomed to it, admiration was gratifying for its own sake. Of course, the homage of Mr. Wright pleases best, but in that gentleman's

absence, the adoration of Monsieur un Tel is sufficiently acceptable on the principle that one must wear mosaic if unable to obtain real gold. She had seen a great deal of the article, both false and true; quite enough to value it when genuine and to crave for it when artificial and adapted only for temporary use. Besides, with all her courage, all her confidence, she was in this respect a very woman—it tired her to stand alone. She longed for a helper, an adviser—somebody to lean on, consult, contradict, and, in certain abnormal instances, to obey.

She walked on, I say, in silence, as a winner can afford to do. The skilful angler allows her fish to play its foolish self, till, exhausted with splashing and struggling, she can land it without the line cutting her fingers or the water wetting her dress. The fish too was mute, but not for long.

"*Did* Maxwell really write to you, Miss Blair?" said he, still savouring the bitter drop in a cup that might have been so sweet.

"Why should he not?" she replied, lifting

her large grey eyes to his with that rare smile of which she well knew the effect. "Would you rather he didn't?"

He often asked himself afterwards why, with such an opening, he had not dashed boldly in. Perhaps she thoroughly realised her power when he blushed, stammered, and answered—if answer it could be called:

"He's an old friend of mine, you know. I was at school with him long ago. I—I wonder he didn't write to *me*."

"Suppose he never wrote at all?" said she, laughing outright.

He drew a long breath of intense relief, while she wondered how men could be so thick-witted, so much easier to manage, than the beasts of the field.

Again they walked on in silence, and now they were nearing the wicket in the park paling through which they must emerge on the publicity of the village. His hands were cold, his throat was dry, his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth.

"Miss Blair," said he, in a faint thick voice;

and for the life of him he could not get out another syllable.

"Well, Mr. Lexley?"

How could she remain so cool and calm while he felt literally choking with emotion? It stung him just enough to give him courage. Loosening his neckcloth and squaring his shoulders, he stood up like a man and looked her in the face.

"He certainly has a good figure," she said to herself, "and he's not so ugly as I thought. I hope he isn't going to ask me to marry him, for I feel as if I might almost say 'Yes.'"

"Miss Blair," he repeated, "will you forgive me for what I am going to tell you? I want you to—to—I don't know how to say it; I never said such a thing to anybody before."

"That is complimentary," she said, half pitying half mocking his agitation; "complimentary, but not reassuring."

"I want to make you understand—to tell you—of course, it's no use— of course, I feel it's hopeless; but—but—Miss Blair, I never saw anybody like you. I never admired any-

body so much, nor cared for anybody before. Couldn't you—I don't mean now, but at a future time when you know me better—couldn't you care for me in return, and give me hope that at last you would—would look on me with some little regard?"

He took her hand and was going to press it to his lips, had she not drawn it hastily away, admitting to herself, while she contrasted this with other declarations she had received of a like nature, that, considering he was so inexperienced, he had done it remarkably well.

"Mr. Lexley," said she, perfectly calm and composed, "am I to understand that you are asking me to be your wife?"

"I know I might as well expect an angel to come down from heaven and marry me, but that is my desire," he answered, unconsciously borrowing from the Baptismal Service his energetic affirmative.

"And do you know *who* I am—*what* I am—how and where all my previous life has been spent, till you met me here for the first time, only a fortnight ago, Mr. Lexley—a fortnight yesterday?"

"Do you remember it?" he exclaimed eagerly. "I could tell you every word you said that night, It was the beginning of a new life to *me!* — whether for happiness or misery, it remains with you to decide. I have staked everything on your answer. Oh, Miss Blair, I could wait for years—I could go through fire and water—I could bear anything —except to give you up!"

"You *do* love me, I think," she said very softly, but keeping at arm's length the while. "Listen, Mr. Lexley. You are younger than I am—younger in years, very much younger in knowledge of the world. Have you considered what it is to marry a woman without fortune, without position, without one single social advantage except a certain comeliness in your eyes, that will be faded long before you are past your prime? Have you ever thought of what your friends would say—your relations, your own parish, and the world in general?"

"I have considered nothing, I have calculated nothing, I have thought of nothing but

you," he answered impetuously. "It is no question of *me*, but of yourself. The whole world might turn its back and welcome, if I saw the least chance of a kind word and a smile from *you* once a week."

Most women are gamblers at heart. Even if they abstain from defying chance on their own account, there are few but acknowledge the charm of recklessness in the other sex, and a man is pretty sure to find favour in their eyes whom they see risking his all at heavy disadvantage because they themselves are the prize. Laura Blair was no exception to the general rule. The most rational argument, the wisest forethought, would have made far less way in her good graces than Lexley's tumultuous declaration that he was ready and willing to pay any price for the toy he coveted, without even inquiring what it was worth. The unaccustomed tears sprang to her eyes, but she sent them back with an effort; and though her lip quivered, her voice was perfectly steady while she spoke.

"Mr. Lexley," said she, "you have paid me

a very high compliment—one that I do not deserve. Hush! do not interrupt me: I repeat, one that I do not deserve. No, I don't hate you; I like you—yes, very much. But that is not the question. Let go my hand; if you choose to take it after you have heard me out—well, perhaps I may consider the matter you mentioned just now. And yet it seems impossible—impossible! Yes, I know all that. I believe you—I *do* from my heart. But still, I say, it ought to be *impossible.* Now listen to me. You never smoke, do you? If you did, I would ask you to light a cigar while I make my little statement. Never mind; promise to be a good boy and hold your tongue. Now, Mr. Lexley, this must be in the strictest confidence as between man and man."

"Wait a moment," he replied, stopping short, for they were walking up and down where the path was thickly screened by laurels. "Before you begin, let me say one word. I do not care what disclosures you make. I love you just the same. If it were possible

that your past life had been worse than any convict's in prison, I should love you just the same. Even if you were married already," he added in a trembling voice, "it would break my heart, and I would never see you again; but I should love you just the same!"

A faint colour tinged the delicate cheek he had often compared to the inner petals of a white rose, and the face he worshipped glowed for a moment with a rush of pride, qualified by pity, astonishment, and something like self-reproach.

"Married," she repeated. "You have hit upon the exact truth. I have been married, Mr. Lexley. No; you needn't break your heart and fly the country for fear of seeing me again. I said I *have* been married. Nobody can regret it more than myself. Now, do you understand how foolish you are? There are scores of girls in society who would love you very dearly, who would make excellent wives, any one of whom I am sure you might have for asking, and everybody would say you had chosen wisely and well."

"I had rather choose for myself," said he, looking rapturously in her face, for his hopes rose with the increasing kindness of her tone. "I *have* chosen my queen; and whenever she comes she shall find me ready, if I have to wait all my life and be disappointed at the end."

"Don't say that," she answered with a sigh. "You deserve a better fate. If there were more men like you in the world there would be more good women. As it is, there are plenty bad of both sexes, and I think fortune has thrown me among some of the worst. My father was not a good man, Mr. Lexley, though I have heard he was a good officer. He broke my mother's heart. I can remember when I was a little thing, how she used to cry when she came to wish me good-night. After she died I was sent away from home to stay with one relation after another, and whilst he lived I don't think I saw him half a dozen times again. Poor mother! How well I remember her. There is a miniature of her in my dressing-case upstairs. Mr.

Lexley, you have a kind heart—I will show it you."

"Was she like *you?*" he asked.

"In features, yes," she replied, smiling rather sadly. "In disposition, very different, and very far superior. My mother was one of the best women that ever lived, and I sometimes think I am capable of being one of the worst! On her death bed she urged my father to marry a young lady, to whom she believed he was attached, and who, I learnt afterwards, received his attentions under the impression that he was a single man. He cared for her as little as for anybody else in the world, except Colonel Blair, but he was rather handsome, very agreeable, and Miss Bland loved him with all her heart. Mr. Lexley, I am telling you *everything.* Can you guess who Miss Bland was?"

"Not a sister of Mrs. Dennison?" said he. "Her maiden name, I know, was Bland."

"Not a sister of Mrs. Dennison," she repeated, "but Mrs. Dennison herself. Now you understand why Plumpton Priors is my

home whenever I like to come, and why, though my position in her house is only that of a companion, Mrs. Dennison seems kinder and more considerate to me than to any of her own family or friends. I wonder whether I still remind her of papa. I hope *not.* The first time I ever saw her she said she knew me by something in my manner and the tone of my voice, even before I told her my name. I was very friendless then, very forlorn and helpless. If it had not been for my two hands I must have starved: but, happily, I could play the pianoforte, and I gave lessons at eighteen-pence an hour. How long the hours used to be! and oh, Mr. Lexley! if you knew how stupid some girls are, and how difficult it is to make them play in time!"

He was looking at her with a fond pitiful admiration that touched her to the heart.

"I hate to think of it," said he. "*You,* who ought to be a queen on a throne!"

"I was a very stupid girl myself, once," she continued hurriedly, and in some confusion. "I ran away from school. You ought to

know this, Mr. Lexley. Ran away with a gentleman I had only seen in my walks to and from church, and had never even spoken to. He wrote me beautiful letters—I was young and foolish, hating school, and having no real home; for a cousin of my father's, who took charge of me in the holidays, never let me forget I was a dependent. It seemed a fine thing to have a lover of one's own, and I suppose I cherished some romantic girlish notions then, that have all been knocked out of me since. In short, I slipped through the gate one morning, before anybody was up, with a thick veil on and a travelling-bag in my hand, to find a four-wheeled cab and a gentleman in a white hat waiting at the end of the lane. By twelve o'clock in the day I was legally entitled to call myself Mrs. Delancy, and crying as if my heart would break, for sheer fright at the plunge I had made."

"Did you care for him," he asked eagerly, with retrospective jealousy, that was equally ludicrous and unreasonable.

"I thought I did then," she answered. "I

am sure I did not *now*. There was so much hurry and excitement about the whole thing, that I had no leisure to analyse my feelings, and I accepted this new life with tolerable content. The very fact of being married seems to a mere girl, as I was, so high a step in the social scale. For a week or two I don't think I regretted my folly, and if Mr. Delancy had been tolerably kind to me I believe I should have made him a good wife—perhaps loved him, though they say a woman never loves a man she cannot respect. But I soon found out what I had done, and wished myself back again a hundred times a day. It was bad enough to grind on through one unvarying routine of lessons, music, back-board, and bread-and-butter, in a place that was half-prison, half-convent, but it was worse to find oneself the slave of an adventurer, the accomplice—Mr. Lexley, I must say it—of a sharper!

"Brussels, Paris, Vienna, Trieste, Italy, Greece—we visited them all, we left them all more or less tainted with suspicion, more or less detected and disgraced. You liked my

playing the other night, didn't you? If I choose, Mr. Lexley, I can play better than most professionals. Well, our plan was this. We took beautiful rooms, drove good horses, lived like people with a large income, and gave pleasant little dinners or suppers, according to the fashion of the place.

"You can guess what it all meant. Mr. Delancy would sit down to any game at cards, against any adversary, for any stake, but what he liked best was écarté in my drawing-room, while I played the pianoforte and overlooked his adversary's hand. Will you believe it—he invented a scale of music by which I could communicate to him the cards his antagonist held; and forced me to assist him in this basest and most cowardly of robberies, because it was so impossible to bring it home! I wonder how I could. I had rather have cut my right hand off; but he frightened me and I *did*. Wait, I have not told you all.

"We never stayed long in one place. Mr. Delancy understood his profession thoroughly, and passed for a wealthy Englishman tormen-

ted with the continual restlessness foreigners attribute to our nation, who, attracted by her musical talents, had run away with a young girl from a convent, and dared not return home, dreading the vengeance of her relatives. This romance served to render us objects of interest, and accounted for my persistent performances on the pianoforte. In this way we travelled nearly round the world. We gave up Europe, after an unmistakable hint to leave Russia, for Egypt, India, Japan, Australia, South America, and New York. I played my treacherous sonatas, and my husband swindled his guests at whist, piquet, écarté—every game in which my music made him independent of chance. He had often been suspected, but in the last place he was found out. A Yankee, of whom he won several thousand dollars, accused him face to face, and when I expected no less than a fearful fracas and an immediate duel, coolly proposed to join partnership with him in fraud, and 'floated by the lady's assistance,' as he expressed it, 'squeeze the marrow out of creation!'

"Then I fired up. There was a fearful row. I gave vent to the indignation I had smothered for years. I spoke my mind freely, till at last he struck me—I'm sure I don't wonder—and I left the house, taking with me nothing but the clothes I had on, to earn my own livelihood, and never see his face again.

"I heard of him though, more than once, while I remained teaching music in New York and Boston, till I could scrape enough money together to bring me home. I heard of his trial for something like forgery, and the narrow escape he had through the manifest perjury of witnesses. I heard of him as concerned in all the gigantic swindles that come to full growth only in the States; the last I heard was that he had started as an accredited agent from one of the new republics, to the Spanish government at the Havannah, in a small steamer that had run many a blockade. The rest is too shocking to tell; but you have listened so far, Mr. Lexley, you must listen to the end.

"The steamer never reached her destination;

the agent never arrived to present his papers; but after a long interval of suspense that steamer came ashore one morning with the flood, her rigging standing, her fittings untouched—(you see I am sailor enough to speak like one)—but her cabins rifled and ransacked; her decks, her bulwarks, her very taffrail stained with blood, and not a living soul on board. She must have been captured by pirates, who had not suffered one of her crew or passengers to escape. The surmise proved too true; and after a rigid inquiry was verified by the Spanish authorities, who sent a ship of war at once to hunt out and punish the offenders. Then I ordered my mourning, and went down on my knees to thank God that I had no children, and was free.

"I made my way back to England after a time, and resuming my maiden name managed to make a livelihood out of my music, and felt tolerably happy. I increased the number of my pupils, and earned many a guinea playing at morning concerts. I wonder if I have ever played to *you* without knowing it. How odd

it would be if I had! So time went on and I should have liked the life very well, but that it was so lonely. The concert people I didn't care about, and a woman who lives by herself in London—no compliments, please—cannot be too particular, so I had no friends. For days together I never opened my lips, except to say 'One, two, three, four,' to my pupils; so I took to reading the advertisements in the daily papers, and wondering if the lady who 'wanted a companion' would like such a companion as me.

"At last I answered a notice that looked promising, made an appointment, called at the house, and was shown upstairs to Mrs. Dennison.

"We rub on together very tolerably. She is kinder to me than to any one else. Last season, in London, she says she found me a great comfort. I don't know how, nor why she required it, but if she is satisfied so am I. Then I came here for a few weeks in the autumn. Since that I have been staying in the Regent's Park with an aunt of my mother's,

and a fortnight ago I returned for good. Now you know all about me, Mr. Lexley. Never breathe a syllable of my strange history. To you and to everybody here I am Miss Blair, and Miss Blair I must remain. We will both forget what you said just now and continue, I hope, the very best of friends."

She put her hand out frankly, and he did what was very natural under the circumstances, if not very discreet. Taking it in both his own he pressed it to his lips, and embarked, as she must have foreseen, on a torrent of protestations, the fiercer that they had been so long kept back.

"I love you—I love you!" he repeated; "the more dearly, the more madly, for all you have gone through. Oh! Miss Blair; after such a life as yours it is something to find an honest man, who would ask no greater blessing than to toil for you and serve you like a slave. I would shelter you from every storm, defend you against every enemy. If I cannot give you happiness, Miss Blair—Laura—I can give you *rest*."

It was what she most desired on earth. No practised suitor versed in women's ways could have invented any argument or entreaty so likely to prevail as this simple plea, that sprang from a truthful heart. She looked full in his face, with a sad smile.

"You little know," she answered, "all you are so eager to undertake, I ought to give you a frank and hearty 'Yes.' I *will*, too, but on certain conditions. I have a good deal of pride, Mr. Lexley, with other evil qualities you will find out in time, and none of your neighbours shall say that the adventuress at Plumpton Priors entrapped our parson into marriage under false pretences. You shall go at once to Mr. Dennison. I believe him to be the kindest and most generous of men. You shall tell him my whole history, and ask his advice. I have perfect confidence in his honour. I will abide by his decision. If he thinks it feasible—why—perhaps we may argue the point again to-morrow in the same place. Here we are, back at the house, and you've never seen the harmonium after all. Good-bye. Will you do as I tell you?"

He drew her towards him ; pressed one kiss on her forehead, and vanished, leaving Miss Blair in a state of much doubt and indecision as to whether she had done wisely or well.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LION'S DEN.

If an Englishman's house is his castle, he certainly selects its donjon keep to live in himself. The squire's justice-room, my lord's library, the duke's sanctum, is invariably the gloomiest apartment architectural science can devise; and whether a man's position obliges him to inhabit a shooting-box or a palace, he seems constrained to move his blotting-book, cigars, bootjack, and other comforts into some dismal hole, whence there is small temptation for any supernumerary guest to turn him out. Mr. Dennison was no exception to the rule. He read, wrote, smoked, slumbered, and indeed spent the greater part of his life in an apart-

ment from which the builder's design had excluded light and air with surprising ingenuity. It was a low, ill-constructed room, that seemed to be all corners, with a heavy ceiling and two narrow windows facing a dead wall. Furnished in unpretending style, with a knee-hole table, a worn leather sofa, a gun-rack, whip-stand, and weighing-machine, it was ornamented by a portrait of Daniel Lambert, a stuffed spaniel in a glass case, an ordnance map of the county, and a half-effaced print representing the meet of a pack of fox-hounds in the year 1750. A few shelves intended for books were laden with disused powder-horns, shot-pouches, and fishing tackle, all out of repair; while the literary element, consisting of a 'Directory,' a work on farriery, and an odd volume of a sporting novel, lay on the writing-table. One article, however, most desirable in itself, and of daily use, I have omitted to mention. It was a deep, easy, and sleep-promoting arm-chair. Mr. Dennison, after a cold ride, to inspect hospital accounts, or preside at poor-law boards, loved to lose himself in its embraces, and court

those unacknowledged snatches of daylight slumber that always seem more enjoyable than the authorized oblivion of night.

From these he was so often disturbed by Aunt Emily, who had no scruple in waking people up to their duty, that he compared himself to Baron Trenck—when, in the persecutions of a Prussian prison, that martyr learned to answer the sentries in his sleep.

The old face seems very worn and weary, though calm and still, in its repose; the thin hair is very white against the black leather covering of the chair; but waking or sleeping, lips and brow wear the placid expression that is stamped by a good heart; and Uncle John, lying dead in his coffin, will look very much as he does now, at rest in his arm-chair.

It disturbs him but little that the door should be flung open, letting in a rush of cold air, answered like clock-work by a puff of smoke down the chimney, and succeeded by the entrance of his wife, who, flouncing noisily into the room, sweeps sundry papers off the writing-table with the swing of her skirts.

He is used to such abrupt arrivals and departures, so he raises his sleepy eyes, and murmurs, "Well my dear, is there anything I can do for you?"

"It is surprising to me," says Aunt Emily in her harshest tones, "how you can snore there like a pig, Mr. Dennison, when you were in bed last night before twelve o'clock, and didn't get up this morning till a quarter to nine. It can't be good for you. It's just the way poor Uncle Edward went off, and I suppose if anybody else told you it was unhealthy, you'd make an effort and discontinue the practice. But I may talk till I'm hoarse."

"Don't do that, dear," he answers; "I'm wide awake now. Is there anything amiss? Anything you want me to put right?"

"Fifty things," is the ungracious reply. "However, that is not the question. I've a piece of news—I dare say you won't believe it—I think Laura has made a conquest. I think Algernon Lexley would propose to her if he had the chance."

"Really!" says he, trying to look more

surprised than he feels. Uncle John, though long since impervious to the universal malady, has not forgotten its symptons, but to admit that he suspected anything of the kind would be to lay himself open to reproach for not imparting so exciting a surmise. He contents himself, therefore, with another, "Really!!" yet more suggestive of wonder than the first.

"Mind, I only say I *think* it," continues Mrs. Dennison, looking exceedingly sagacious. "I can see as far as my neighbours, and I am confident he admires her. They are out walking together now, and I shouldn't wonder the least if he proposed before they come home. She will consult me, of course. I don't quite know what to say. It would be a good thing for Laura, if it *can* be a good thing for a woman to be married."

"And a bad thing for Lexley," says Uncle John; "if it *can* be a bad thing for a man to be married."

"Oh! I know what *you* think," continues his wife, irritably. "But I am considering my friend's welfare, here and hereafter. What's his living worth?"

Mr. Dennison pondered. "Perpetual curacy, my dear," he answered, "not a living, more's the pity. It may bring him in three hundred a year at the outside. He has some private fortune, I know; but still he is hardly what you ladies call a good match. Hadn't they better put it off, and see what turns up?"

"You always say *that*, when people are going to be married," replied his wife, in high scorn. "You never seem to think it *can* answer, though I'm sure in your own case it has been the saving of you. If it hadn't been for me—managing, scheming, toiling like a slave—you'd have been ruined years ago; and in your grave too, I firmly believe. But it's no use looking for gratitude from a *man!*"

"My dear, I'm sure you've done admirably," answered placable Uncle John; "but as Lexley, who is a well-principled fellow, does not think of proposing to *you*, it seems that we are travelling out of the record—what our friend Foster would call, getting off the line. By-the-by, Emily, have you ordered a room for young Maxwell?"

"Of course I have. Didn't you tell me he was coming? It would be a good thing for Laura, no doubt," continued Mrs. Dennison, reverting to the engrossing topic. "She has no friends, no expectations, not a farthing of her own; and her good looks are fading every day. I really believe she couldn't do better. And as for him—"

"As for him," repeated Uncle John, "it's not quite so clear a case. She's a wonderful musician, no doubt; has a handsome face, a fine figure, and is always beautifully dressed; but do you consider she's the sort of person to make a good clergyman's wife?"

Now Mrs. Dennison was a shrewd woman enough, and this was exactly the point she had been debating in her own mind ever since the idea entered her head that it would be a capital thing for Laura if she could effect a match with the tall young parson. She was not without scruples, and although dissatisfied, as most women are, with the number she had drawn in the matrimonial lottery, entertained, in common with her sex, an exaggerated idea

of the happiness enjoyed, through that institution, by those who were more fortunate than herself. She felt, and indeed proclaimed, that it was a great responsibility to bring people together with a view to coupling them for life; always declaring she was the last person in the world to interfere in such matters, and had made it a rule, since she was a girl, to "wash her hands," as she expressed it, "of the whole concern."

Whatever doubts she entertained as to its wisdom were at once dispelled by her husband's apparent disinclination to her plan. It only required a little opposition to decide Aunt Emily on persevering in any line of conduct she had once commenced, and Uncle John was neither irritated nor surprised when, after a minute's silence, she walked to the grate, stirred the fire with considerable vehemence, and thus delivered her verdict:

"I think it would be for the happiness of both. If my opinion is asked, I shall say so openly. It's my firm belief marriages are made in heaven. You needn't laugh, Mr.

Dennison, though I dare say *you* consider the whole thing is a trial, rather than a blessing!"

"My dear, I never said so!" protested Uncle John, wondering at the sagacity that had thus fathomed his sentiments and the eloquence that could express them in so concise a form of speech.

"Very well, then, *that's* settled;" continued Mrs. Dennison. "Now, about the upper housemaid. I've paid her wages to the 8th—that's her month, you know—with her fare, third class, back to London. And do you choose to have the furniture cleaned in the pink dressing-room? It's like a pigsty at this moment."

"My dear, *you* manage these things," replied her husband, who was getting sleepy again. "I don't think I ever *saw* the upper housemaid—thank goodness none of them come in here—and I haven't set foot in the pink dressing-room for thirty years; whatever you settle I am sure to think right."

"Yes, but you ought to *know*," she replied; "I can't imagine how you spend your time

down here. You never look into the tradesmen's bills, nor the house accounts, nor anything but that plan for enlarging Middleton Hospital and those rubbishing letters from your agent. Well, I suppose, as the song says, 'Women must work.'"

"And men must sleep," he added, good-humouredly, though the accusation of idleness was somewhat hard on Uncle John, than whom nobody could toil more indefatigably at county business nor take more trouble to promote the welfare of his labourers, tenantry, and neighbours.

"Hush!" exclaimed Aunt Emily, setting down the poker with a vigour that brought tongs and fire-shovel clanging into the fender.

"That's Mr. Lexley's foot in the passage. I've a deal more to say. It will do another time. *Mind*, I think it an excellent plan," and out she sailed with a gracious smile, somewhat thrown away on the visitor, whose preoccupation was very apparent as he came in.

"I walked over again to day," he began, "to see you about that road-rate; something

has happened since to put it all out of my head. Mr. Dennison, I want to speak to you on a very serious matter—of course in the strictest confidence."

"My dear fellow," replied Uncle John, "nothing *can* be a very serious matter when a man is under thirty. But let us do one thing at a time. You will find the estimate for your road-rate on that writing-table, unless Mrs. Dennison has swept it into the fire with her dress. Put it in your pocket, and take it home. I copied it out on purpose. Now, is this a long story you have to tell?"

Mr. Dennison had the knack of putting people at their ease. He entered into their feelings from sheer kindness of disposition, and was a living instance of Count d'Orsay's famous maxim that "A good heart is good manners ready made."

"There is much to explain," said Lexley, brightening. "But I will make it as short as I can."

"All right," answered his host, proceeding to light a cigar with great deliberation. "I

always listen best when I smoke. Now, fire away!"

Then Lexley, with less circumlocution than might have been expected from the style of his sermons, informed his host how, since he had met a certain lady at the Priors, he had formed for himself an ideal of domestic happiness that never entered his head before; how he had considered the subject in all its bearings as a man and a clergyman; how he had come to the decision that Miss Blair was the only woman on earth who could make him happy; and how, not half an hour ago, he had taken the fatal plunge and asked her to be his wife. "It was an anxious moment," he concluded, "and I own I trembled for her answer."

"I never did it but once," said Uncle John, "and if I remember right, I was in a horrible funk too."

"She is an angel," exclaimed the clergyman. "She—she accepted me under certain conditions. But first she told me the sad history of her life. She's a widow, Mr. Dennison. She has been married before."

"That's rather an advantage," observed the other, between the whiffs of his cigar. "She won't expect you to be much better than the rest of mankind, and will be less disappointed than a girl."

"She has gone through a deal of trouble," continued the lover, "and I only pray that I may be able to make up to her for the hardships of her past life. Do you know what her husband was?"

"I know a great many things," answered his host, "that I say nothing about. Her husband was a good-looking scamp named Delancy, who began life as a clerk in an insurance office, turned billiard-marker, blackleg, sharper all round, and so set up for a gentleman. In this last capacity he robbed Percy Mortimer of seven hundred pounds at a sitting at Rio Janeiro. Percy took a great fancy to him, and says he is the cleverest scoundrel he ever knew. What has become of him?"

Lexley looked up alarmed.

"Isn't he dead? He was murdered by pirates somewhere in the West Indies."

"Then I am sorry piracy is a capital offence. Go on."

"Since his death she has been supporting herself by giving music lessons at eighteenpence an hour. I cannot bear to think of it. Then Mrs. Dennison"—here Lexley, remembering *why* Mrs. Dennison took a fancy to her, blundered somewhat in his narrative—"Mrs. Dennison, who is kindness itself, gave her a home, and her lot has been comparatively a bright one since. After such a past, Mr. Dennison, do you think she would find it very hard to settle down as a country parson's wife?"

"Before I answer, let me ask you one question. Are you in love with this woman? I mean *really* in love as people are in a book?"

"I would lay down my life for her this moment. I worship the very ground she walks on."

"And you have known her just a fortnight! Truly, my dear Lexley, as old Chaucer says, 'the wisest clerks are not the wisest men.'"

"I admit that it sounds hasty, boyish, romantic, idiotic, if you like," continued the

clergyman; "but I am not the first man, nor shall I be the last, who has shut his eyes tight, put his hand in the lucky bag and drawn out a prize. It is at Miss Blair's own desire that I have come to consult yon. She will not marry me without your consent, your approval, and will abide by your decision as to the wisdom of the step for my sake, not her own."

Fast and thick came the puffs of Uncle John's cigar, till they hung in clouds about his venerable head. After some minutes' pause he waved them away with his hand, and then the oracle spoke out—

"Were you asking me for advice as to marriage in the abstract, I should say, 'My good fellow, wait and see what turns up. Early marriages are apt to end in disappointment, that sometimes degenerates into disgust. Later in life people expect very little, and have learned to content themselves with less.' But if you really *have* set your heart so entirely on this particular lady, who, I grant you, is very handsome and fascinating, why I suppose

you must go through the mill—I don't think anything else will cure you, and I congratulate you with all my heart. There is but one bit of advice I can give. Don't start with too exalted an idea of your goddess. She *must* come down from her pedestal sometimes. You wouldn't be so fond of her if she wasn't *a woman*, and being a woman you shouldn't think the worse of her that she has women's ways and women's weaknesses. When she does not agree with you, don't be provoked with her, because she is your wife; but listen to her courteously, though she *is* talking nonsense, as you would to any other lady. If you can manage her at all, it will be through her affections, not through her sagacity nor her self-interest; and, above all, never attempt to reason with her as you would with a man!"

"You are a kind friend, Mr. Dennison," said the other, "and I thank you from my heart. I will follow your advice to the letter."

"I am sure you will," answered Uncle John, "as it tallies with your own inclinations. Now you had better go and ask the ladies to

give you a cup of tea; they can't know you are an engaged man yet, and will be glad to see you in the drawing-room."

So Lexley, hoping for one more glimpse of his idol, traversed a dark passage and a red-baize door into the hall, where he paused, felt his whiskers, and shook himself together a little before entering the blue drawing-room.

Since his accident, this apartment had been entirely given over to Percy Mortimer. Yet, moved by his piteous entreaties, it had come to be an established custom for the ladies to assemble there at tea time. Though the hum of laughter and conversation came from within, Lexley felt when he opened the door, that to *him* the blue drawing-room was a blank.

Annie Dennison sat near Mr. Mortimer's sofa filling the cups and talking volubly. Her aunt, knitting in an arm-chair, seemed in high good-humour. The invalid, lying back on his sofa, looked, as usual, sleek, imperturbable, satisfied with the world in general and with Percy Mortimer in particular. To Lexley he had never before seemed so interesting, for

did not somebody's husband win seven hundred of him (however unfairly) at Rio Janeiro?

With one despairing glance round the room, he satisfied himself of *her* absence. He satisfied himself of something else too! Though he could not have explained why, he felt sure that he had been watched—suspected—found out.

There was a cordiality like that of a mother-in-law in Aunt Emily's welcome. Annie shot at him admiring glances of mingled mirth and approval, while Percy Mortimer's manner denoted a degree of interest and even commiseration as touching as it was unusual; were further evidence required it was furnished by Aunt Emily's reproving frown when Annie offered the young clergyman tea, with this pert observation:

"You must want it sadly after your walk. Laura is so tired she has sent for hers upstairs."

Poor Lexley's confusion was painfully apparent, and Percy Mortimer came to the rescue. As a rule, a man dislikes seeing another man subjected to slow torture.

"Shall you foot it all the way back?" said he heartily. "How a fellow envies you who has but one leg to stand on. If you'll make the match I'll back you to do a thousand miles in a thousand hours."

How this sporting proposal would have been answered, and whether in his agitation the clergyman might not have rushed wildly into this or any other wager of a like nature, can never now be known, for even while Mortimer spoke the tingling of the door-bell vibrated through the house, dogs barked, voices were heard in the hall, and an arrival, accompanied by a draught of cold air from without, was ushered into the drawing-room.

"Why it's Mr. Maxwell!" said Aunt Emily. The observant ear would have detected in her tone a certain austere gratification, as of one whose prophecies, wasted on unbelieving ears, had been triumphantly fulfilled.

"Why it's Mr. Maxwell!" echoed Annie, and in her voice lurked a subdued and tender welcome, not without something of reproach

that seemed to murmur, "Too late; you ought to have been here yesterday or the day before."

"Why it's Maxwell!" repeated Mortimer, from the sofa; and had the usages of society admitted of his speaking his sentiments aloud, he would have added, "I'm always pleased to see you, old fellow; but I should have been better pleased if you had staid away. Why the deuce have you come back now?"

Why the deuce had he? It was the question he asked himself all the way down in the train, all the way from the station in his fly, though he knew the answer quite well, and read it besides in Annie's dark eyes the moment he entered the drawing-room. They had haunted him a good deal in London during the last ten days, floating about over *précis* and protocols in his office, getting between his vision and the queen of trumps at the Turf Club, gazing at him through the ranks of dancers and over the heads of chaperons on staircases and in ball-rooms, crowded even now on the wintry side of Easter; once,

seen as in a dream dimmed with such sad and sweet reproach that he rose prematurely to go home from a noisy supper-party to which he had better never have sat down. He *must* take one more look at them, he told himself, if only to be satisfied they were less dangerous in reality than imagination. He had been invited to come back to the Priors and have another ride on Barmecide. It would seem rude not to go, and unkind besides towards Percy, about whom he was *exceedingly anxious*, so he asked his chief for a couple of days' leave, took his railway ticket, telegraphed for a fly, and here he was! Shaking hands with Miss Dennison, he felt the dark eyes were deadlier than ever at close quarters, and that perhaps he had better have staid away.

She seemed to have lost her tongue. Aunt Emily was buried in thought, musing indeed on the probability that her new housemaid had forgotten to light a fire in Mr. Maxwell's room; Horace, himself, usually so glib and debonair, could think of nothing to say, and was really grateful to Mortimer for an oppor-

tunity of answering the established question—

"Have you brought an evening paper? Is there any news in London?"

None whatever, of course. Then out came the usual budget. Ministers had a squeak for it last night on the Tramways and Traffic Bill; Lord St. Lukes, commonly called "the Silent Friend," had made a capital speech; Miss Myrtle's marriage was off (this from the best authority); the foreign horse was safe to win the Two Thousand; the Duke's interest had failed to carry the Buttermouth election, and the Duchess was *furious;* a Frenchman was advertised to start for America in a balloon; and the Quorn had had a good run from John-o'-Gaunt. He had told them everything, and *there* was the *Globe.*

Mortimer made a dash at the paper, and Horace, drawing near Miss Dennison, asked after his friend Lexley, as an excuse for something to say.

"Mr. Lexley!" repeated Annie, looking round. "Why he was in the room a minute

ago. I *do* think you have told us very little news, Mr. Maxwell, considering you were so long away. We're quiet people enough in the country, but we don't altogether go to sleep, even here. I shouldn't wonder if we too had something interesting to communicate before this time to-morrow."

"Annie, Annie!" exclaimed Aunt Emily, in tones of stern reproof; but Annie, nothing daunted, prattled on:

"Don't you miss anybody, Mr. Maxwell? Has a week of London made you so worldly that you cannot remember each individual composing our humble family circle? Probably some new fellow-traveller has put her out of your head, but you have never asked after Miss Blair."

"I wasn't thinking of Miss Blair," said he "I hope she's quite well."

"She *was*, to-day, at luncheon-time," replied Annie. "How she will feel to-morrow at breakfast when she has been made acquainted with your neglect, I will not take upon me to say, unless, indeed, she has found other consolations, other —"

"Annie, it's time to dress," interrupted her aunt, rising in majestic displeasure. "Mr. Maxwell, be good enough to ring the bell. I've put you in your old room, and we dine at a quarter before eight."

As the door closed on the ladies, Horace drew to his friend's sofa. "How's the leg, old fellow?" said he. "And what's all this about our handsome friend, Miss Blair?"

Mortimer twisted amongst his cushions while he replied:

"I can't help thinking there's something up between her and the parson, they've been for a long walk together this afternoon, and Lexley bolted directly you came in."

CHAPTER IX.

SOUVENT FEMME VARIE.

Availing himself of his familiarity with its passages and back settlements, Lexley had indeed effected his escape from the Priors at the moment of his friend's arrival, seen only by a scullery-maid. As he glided past the glowing regions of the kitchen into the outer air, that imaginative damsel, always on the watch for ghosts, relieved her nerves by a little scream, when his tall figure disappeared into the night, but he had otherwise no reason to be dissatisfied with the skill and secrecy of his retreat. Passing in front of the house, he paused to look steadfastly on one of the many windows of the upper storey through which

lights could be seen burning, then with a blessing on his lips and a strange wild rapture in his heart, dashed across the park on his homeward journey.

In that room, he told himself, as his long bounding strides took him further and further from the shrine of his divinity, dwelt the paragon to whom henceforth his whole life should be devoted.

Through that room he pictured her moving to and fro in the majesty of a beauty that all the jewels of the East would be powerless to enhance, thinking surely of *him!* However bitter may have been our experience, by whatever training our passions have been subdued, the heart will judge another's feelings by its own. She had almost promised, nay, subject to Uncle John's approval, she had *quite* promised, to be his wife; she *must* be meditating now on that future to which she was pledged, and recalling more than kindly the words of him who would give his life for one loving look, one bright confiding smile.

"Perhaps she sees me now," thought

Lexley, walking over five miles an hour in his excitement, "as clearly as I see her. Perhaps at this very moment she is telling herself that it is worth something to be offered such blind and trusting devotion as mine. 'You do love me, I think,' she said, in those clear sweet tones that are like music from heaven. I *do*, I *do!* My Darling, how I wish I could be with you this very moment. I believe I should never have the heart to leave you again!"

Was she thinking of him? We can go into Miss Blair's room if we like, and see what she is about.

She has dressed for dinner more carefully than ever, and cannot but admit that the result of her toilet is very satisfactory and effective. With most women such a consciousness would afford at least an agreeable sensation, but Miss Blair looks in the glass and mutters audibly, "You fool! how you *have* thrown yourself away!" Then she moves the candles to a writing-table, sits carefully down so as not to crease her dress, and

unlocks a brass-bound desk that seems to have seen no little service.

Out they come, tumbling on the blotting-book, a dozen photographs at least, and she scans them, one after another, with a bitter smile, as if in scorn of her admirers no less than of herself. To three she accords a grave and sad attention. The first is a young handsome man in the uniform of the Austrian cavalry. "Poor Ernest!" she murmurs, "I do believe you cared for me. That was a foolish duel, too. And how could you expect it would lead to anything but my deciding never to see you again? It was only humanity on my part, for I could *not* have loved you, with that dear silly face; but you were a kind-hearted affectionate boy, and I am sorry I made you so unhappy. Yes, I shall keep *yours*."

Then she draws a second from its envelope with real concern. This is a stout, uninteresting personage, wearing a furred coat, with a foreign order as broad as an insurance plate on its breast. There is something coarse

and sensual about his lips and nostrils, his eyes are heavy, and his mouth is large; but the man looks well-to-do and prosperous, even in a photograph.

"Ah!" she says, shaking her head mournfully. "*You* were the great mistake of my life. But I couldn't—I *couldn't*—I don't think I could, even *now*. And yet what a position! What wealth! What diamonds! What carriages and horses! What luxury! The place in Moldavia was fit for an empress. Then, obstinate, pig-headed as you were, I could lead you with a thread. Everybody urged me to it—even Delancy. The heartless villain! And a divorce is so easy to get in that country. I shall never forget the day you asked me, nor the Grand Duchess's face when she sent for you from the *Engländerinn's* side—the *Engländerinn*, indeed! How angry she was, and you, too, when you came back and found the Grand Duke himself had taken your place. You lost your temper then, and made your strange and startling proposal. How clumsily and ungraciously you did it!

But I ought to have accepted. I should have been a great lady now; very rich, and very—no, not happy; very much disgusted, I expect. Still, I should have advised any one else to do it in my place. I wonder whether I was a good woman to say 'No,' or only a great fool! I scarcely knew which, even when I saw you driving that hideous little princess about Bucharest; but she led you the life of a dog, and ran away with a Belgian. That's one comfort. Well, in my whole experience of mankind, you were most unlike the rest of the world; and if all my other photographs must be swept into the fire, were it only as a matter of curiosity, I should keep *you*."

So the likeness goes back into its cover, and she draws out another, of which the lineaments seem blurred and indistinct, for all the scorn has faded from her face, and she sees it through a mist of tears.

"Oh, my darling—my darling!" she whispers, "if I had but met you sooner, how different life would have been! What a dream it is now, that island in the Greek sea,

and the bench beneath the cedars, and those long Italian lessons, with your dark eyes looking into mine. Was ever language so sweet, or spoken by so sweet a voice? All women loved you, and no wonder; but none, I think, so well as I did. And I never told you —never. But you were sure of it, my own! Sure as I was that you cared for *me*. Shall I ever forget your look when my husband, shuffling his cards, with that hateful laugh, said, 'Laura, you have a good head, but no heart.' You knew me better, and trusted me, even as I trusted *you*. And now, to think of that brave, beautiful face sleeping forty fathoms deep in the blue Mediterranean! and I shall never, never see it again! Oh, Victor! I wish I was with you there—at rest for ever, by your side,"

Here Miss Blair, breaking down entirely, buries her face in her shapely hands, and cries quietly for a few seconds, till she remembers that her eyes will be red, and that Mr. Maxwell will probably sit opposite to her at dinner.

She knows, or rather guesses, that he has arrived, having already referred more than once to 'Bradshaw's Railway Guide' in the library, and calculating the hour at which the train is due, with the distance by road from the station, is satisfied that the bustle she has overheard in the hall can only have been created by the expected traveller from London.

So she bathes her eyes in cold water till all trace of tears has been removed, and setting aside the three reserved photographs, locks them carefully away in her desk. Then, sweeping the others together in a heap, puts them all on the fire, to be held down with the poker till they are consumed. It seems to her that by this holocaust she has done full justice to the man who so lately asked her to be his wife; and having thus liberated herself, as it were, from quarantine, that she is entitled to start on a fresh cruise with a clean bill of health and a roving commission once more.

"But I must make up my mind to-night,"

she thinks, while finally arming herself with fan, gloves, and pocket-handkerchief. "What a fool I am not to have made it up this afternoon. Has he not offered me the very thing I want? A home, where I can be safe and at rest. How often I have longed for just such a lot as this! A life of peace and quiet and security, with a good man that one wasn't too fond of, to provide for and take care of one. There is no fear of my being too fond of Mr. Lexley, and yet I like him well enough in a cold, rational way. After all, he is by no means ugly when he gets excited; and there is something very manly in his voice and bearing when called upon to exert himself that makes me feel I could trust him, and perhaps after a time get as fond of him as my nature will allow. We should live down here, I suppose, in a pretty little house with roses at the windows, and I would drive a basket carriage about amongst his poor people, order his dinner, mend his gloves, look after his comforts, and make my husband thoroughly happy. My *husband!* How odd to associate

that word with anything but a shudder of fear, contempt and disgust. He certainly cares for me *horribly!* Quite as much as any of the others did. And I—oh! I *must* have something to love I am *so* lonely; and when my pride breaks down, I feel as if I should like to die. He would be very good to me, I think, very gentle and forbearing. I should tell him everything—everything—my whole history from beginning to end. I am glad I was so honest to-day; it will make it all the easier. And he will put his strong arm round me and call me 'Laura,' as Victor did. Oh! why has this man come back from London to spoil it all? and why has he got that haunting pleading look of Victor in his eyes?"

Who would have thought the beautiful woman who swept into the drawing-room five minutes afterwards, cold as marble and stately as a queen, could have hidden all these passions, feelings, and memories beneath that calm, courteous manner—that gracious, dignified bearing? And was it not as well that Lexley, halfway home by this time, had been debarred

by the laws of material nature from assisting at a toilet that could call forth so many painful and conflicting emotions?

It was worthy of remark, that even Aunt Emily, whose want of tact was proverbial, did not congratulate Miss Blair on the result of her afternoon's expedition, though satisfied that her own anticipations had certainly been realised. Nor did Annie Dennison venture on any more direct impertinence than a hope "Miss Blair's walk had not tired her too much to play to-night, even for so small an audience." But Uncle John, who took her in to dinner, gave her arm just such a gentle pressure as assured her of his secrecy and support, whatever course she might think proper to pursue.

"How kind you always are!" she whispered; and, strange to say, could not trust her voice to add another syllable.

It was but a small party, very different from that which had gathered round the same table the night before the memorable run from Plumpton Osiers. Horace Maxwell sat by the side of Annie, and opposite Miss Blair.

The former was silent and preoccupied. Horace thought, like a fool, she had left her heart on the invalid's sofa in the next room. Miss Blair never talked much, but she asked him a few questions across the table, for the pleasure of meeting his glance when he replied. The dark eyes reminded her more than ever of poor Victor; and the difficulty of making up her mind for to-morrow only increased as the evening wore on.

Matters were still worse when coffee was brought into the drawing-room. Aunt Emily, who wrote her letters at all sorts of inconvenient hours, was scribbling assiduously in her own corner; Annie, with the awkwardness of inexperience, had got wedged into a chair behind Mortimer's sofa, from which she dared not extricate herself under Maxwell's eye, lest he should think she wanted to be near him—an idea that would have made him supremely happy, as perhaps she suspected; and yet wishing heartily to do this very thing, she would rather have put her hand in the fire than have done it. Uncle John had wrapped

himself in the folds of a county paper. Miss Blair and Maxwell were fairly thrown on their own resources for companionship and amusement.

He proposed a game at billiards in the next room, chiefly, I am bound to say, out of pique, and watching Miss Dennison the while. Annie neither lifted her eyes nor turned her head; and Horace stalked off to the billiard table, smothering in a careless laugh certain twinges of jealousy caused by the young lady's untiring devotion to her patient. No sooner were the billiard players out of hearing, however, than she relieved her mind by an audible "Well, I *do* think!" which caused Uncle John to look up from his newspaper, and Percy Mortimer to laugh.

Miss Blair was not very expert with a cue. Restless Horace soon wished himself back again, but he had brought her here, and was bound to play out the game.

She strung to begin—won, and put her ball in balk.

"Is not Mr. Lexley a great friend of yours?"

she asked, while Horace, with brilliant execution, attempted an impossible stroke—and failed.

"Very," he replied, carelessly. "Best fellow in the world, Lexley. We were boys together. Why isn't he here?"

"Don't you know? Now tell me the truth, Mr. Maxwell. Don't you really know?—(Can I make a cannon off the red?)—I am glad he is a friend of yours. I've a great mind to tell you something."

"Do," said Horace, who thought he heard a move in the next room, and fixed his attention with difficulty on the matter in hand. "I'm dying to know everything."

"I *like* him to have nice friends. That is the reason. Now can't you guess?"

He looked up, suddenly enlightened. "Do you mean that he's going to be married, Miss Blair? Dear old fellow! I wish him joy with all my heart."

He not *you!* Then it was the friend who at once excited his interest, not the woman thus removed for ever out of reach. The

frank and hearty tone declared his sentiments too clearly. She could have struck him with her cue.

"And won't you wish *me* joy, Mr. Maxwell?" she asked, making an egregious miss that left a powdering of chalk on the cloth. "Am I to count for nothing in an arrangement, which at least could not well take place without my consent?"

"Certainly not," replied Horace, with the readiness of a man of the world towards a woman whom he does *not* love. "I congratulate my friend because he has drawn a prize. I do not congratulate *you*, because you could marry anybody you choose. Only I think you have made a good choice."

She swept him a scornful curtsey, passing round the table for her next stroke, and though she looked very proud and handsome while she played it, Horace could not repress a little shudder of commiseration, and a hope that his friend Lexley had not got a handful.

"It's quite true," she resumed.—"How badly I'm playing to-night!—Everybody will

know all about it to-morrow, so I tell *you* of it in confidence now. Mr. Lexley this afternoon did me the great honour of asking me to be his wife."

He was sprawling over the table for a losing hazard, and she watched him narrowly while she spoke. Not a quiver of lip or eyelid betrayed the slightest emotion, nor did his cue deviate one hair's-breadth from its aim.

"That's five," said he, taking the balls out of their respective pockets and playing again, before he reverted to the previous question. "He's a plucky fellow, Lexley; and nobody could wish him more success than I do."

"Did it require such courage, then?" she asked, with one of her smiles. "Should you —I mean should any man, hesitate on the brink, when a bold plunge lets him know at once whether he is to sink or swim? If people won't ask, how are other people to guess what they want? I have told you Mr. Lexley did ask. I haven't told you whether *other people* accepted him."

This was the crucial test—now or never.

Surely if he cared for her the cue would be dropped, and the player, metaphorically if not literally, at her feet. She watched him narrowly, and thinking it all over afterwards, could not but admit there was something of relief mingled with her disappointment when, feeling quietly under the table for chalk, he observed, with as little discomposure as if she had been his grandmother:

"But you *will*, Miss Blair. He's a dear, good fellow. He'd make a capital husband, and it knocks a man out of time altogether to be thrown over in a thing of this kind."

"You speak feelingly, Mr. Maxwell," she answered, with admirable self-possession. "Has it ever happened to yourself?"

"Often," he said; "and I don't like it at all. It seems to be my fate to originate 'rejected addresses.' I have made up my mind never to try again till I am quite sure."

But though he laughed his heart was aching, because of the dark eyes in the next room, belonging to the only woman he had ever seen, whom he wished in real earnest to make his wife.

She played her last card now, quietly and deliberately, like a true gambler,

"And if you *were* quite sure," she said, bending over the table to hide a blush, "would that encourage you to begin, or would the lady have to tell it you herself in so many words?"

Even now he could not, or would not, understand. Her whole future as the clergyman's wife seemed to shape itself definitely, while he struck the butt-end of his cue on the floor, and exclaimed, in that frank tone of friendship no woman ever mistakes for love:

"Miss Blair, you're a witch! You have found me out, I do believe. Listen, now. Confidence for confidence. Do you remember that day at dinner, when you were kind enough to show such perfect faith in my honour and discretion?"

"I trusted you implicitly then, just as I trust you now," she answered, and at that moment the door opened to admit the graceful head of Miss Dennison, who had been despatched by her aunt to know if she should send the billiard players some tea.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said Annie, stung by the last sentence, which she overheard, and on which she put her own construction, while she affected to withdraw, as if unwilling to break in on a lover's *tête-à-tête.*

"It was only to tell you tea is ready. Never mind; I dare say you are amusing yourselves very pleasantly here."

"Don't go, Miss Dennison," gasped Horace, wishing his handsome antagonist at the bottom of the sea.

But Annie was hurt and implacable. "I hate being in the way," said she with a little forced laugh and a quiver of her lip. "I don't care much for billiards myself. Please go on and don't mind me."

But Miss Blair was already in the drawing-room. "I shall not play any more," said she, passing haughtily through the doorway. "Mr. Maxwell has beaten me a love-game!"

CHAPTER X.

FOL QUI S'Y FIE.

Maxwell had better have staid away. He felt this in spite of his host's hospitable welcome, reiterated when they found themselves together in the smoking-room, where Uncle John loved to betake himself if the ladies did not go to bed too late. In spite of Aunt Emily's gracious reception, of his friend's improving health, of Miss Blair's unconcealed partiality, nay, of Annie Dennison's dark, soft, shining eyes—even the temptation of another mount on Barmecide failed to satisfy him that he had been wise in coming down so readily from London.

"I wish there was any hunting for you to-

morrow," said his host, while they arranged themselves comfortably over a blazing fire. "But it's not Foster's day, and the Duke is too far off—three-and-twenty miles at least, and a bad place when you get there. However, you'll be in the Middleton country the day after. I hope you may have as good a run as last time, and that Barmecide won't put you down again. To-morrow is my day for Petty Sessions too, so you must make it out with the ladies as well as you can. You fellows at the Foreign Office are great in that line, I know."

"What is your honest opinion, Mr. Dennison?" asked Horace, stretching himself luxuriously in the warmth. "Don't you think, altogether, women are rather a mistake?"

"How should we get on without them?" said Uncle John, smoking meditatively. "They certainly *do* prevent our sitting too long after dinner, and in married life no doubt they make one get up in the morning. No, I shouldn't say they were a mistake, though on certain points they would bear modification."

"All the jolliest fellows I know are

bachelors," affirmed Horace, who at that moment desired but one thing on earth—the privilege of surrendering his liberty to the woman he was angry with, because he loved her.

"I doubt it," said Uncle John. "I have often considered the subject, and always arrived at the opposite conclusion. A bachelor does what he likes, and though it sounds a paradox, no man who does what he likes is really happy.

"And yet if you reflect upon it," argued Horace, "two-thirds of the sorrows and half the discomforts of life originate with women. You see a young fellow going to the bad, taking to play, or brandy-and-water; ten to one there is a woman in the case. He has been thrown over, and revenges himself *on* himself; or he has failed to awaken an interest, and thinks with some justice, that the bigger fool he makes of himself, the better she will like him. You observe a jolly, cheerful old gentleman grown suddenly crusty, contradictory, and cantankerous. If you take the

trouble to inquire you will probably find that his wife is going to make him do something he cordially hates, with a sublime disregard for her husband's comfort, as compared with her duties to society and position before the world. I declare I think if there were no women, we should be supremely happy, as there is no doubt we should be exceedingly good."

"We should be exceedingly selfish," replied his host; "a failing there is no fear a man will acquire whose lot is cast with the opposite sex. They take care of *that*. In all the trifles of life they consult their own wishes and convenience, irrespective of time, weather, argument, objection, natural obstacles, and physical impossibilities; but I am bound to say that when you put them on their mettle, and demand of them a great sacrifice, they are far more ready to offer it than you can be to accept."

"Only one's life is not made up of great sacrifices," argued Maxwell. "And every-day comfort has much more to do with happiness than occasional self-denial. Nothing can

repay a fellow for having to put on a pair of tight boots every time he gets out of bed."

Uncle John, who knew where his own shoe pinched, could not but admit the force of this illustration. He stuck to his position, nevertheless.

"A world without women," he replied, "or perhaps I should say a state of society from which the female element was practically excluded, would be wanting in the very essence of government, the principle of self restraint.

"'The greatest good for the greatest number,' is a moral law that such a society could never be made to understand; the religion of Mahomet has attempted to establish something of the kind, but that is no argument one way or the other, for, in common with his Oriental brethren of all creeds, the Mussulman has completely failed to bring his womankind into subjection, and a Turkish gentleman of wealth and position, is as fine a specimen of the henpecked husband as you will find in any country on earth. I remember, in my coaching days, we tried to persuade

ourselves it was easier to drive four horses than one. The Turk has adapted this fallacy to his domestic life, and found, I believe, no sort of difference in the result. If one of his wives only puts her slippers outside the door, he no more dare go into the room, than I dare tell Mrs. Dennison she ought not to wear the same dresses now she did thirty years ago. No; in the saddle the Turk is above admiration—in the harem, which answers to his wife's boudoir, below contempt."

"He has always the Bosphorus to fall back upon," said Horace, lighting a fresh cigar.

"That's where they beat us!" exclaimed Uncle John. "Every man has a remedy in his own hands, quite as efficacious as the sack and the sea; but who has the heart to apply it? To the husband who could punish, judicially, coldly, and without remorse, they will never give offence. But happily such are rare exceptions among mankind. From good-nature, indolence, and a dread of being talked about, husbands are wonderfully placable, even under strong provocation, and women show

the ingenuity of their sex in nothing more than the skill with which they prove the elasticity of a masculine temper, by trying it to the very utmost limit that can be borne without giving way. Of all dangerous amusements, I know none so completely to their taste as skating on thin ice."

"And when it lets them in, with a souse," said Horace, "not one of their own sex will wet a finger to pull them out. It makes one shy of putting oneself in a woman's power, to see how she treats another woman, of whom she has the upper hand. You may be sure, if she gets her down, she will keep her down."

"There I take leave to differ," observed his host. "Neither you, nor I, nor any one else, can be sure of what she will or will not do. We have no *data* from which to argue. I grant that, as a general rule, they seem very hard on each other; but take any general rule of their conduct as your guide for a particular instance, and see where it will lead you."

"Then you come back to where I started." said Horace. "Women *are* a mistake, and a

wise man will keep clear of the whole difficulty by remaining a bachelor."

"I know a good many bachelors who are anything but clear of the whole difficulty," answered the other. "Indeed, I am not sure but that bachelors are more apt to be under the yoke than married men, on the principle I suppose, that a volunteer is often keener than a regular soldier. No; there is an old adage which affirms a self-evident truth, that 'when two people ride on a horse, one must ride behind.' In that sentence is condensed the whole science of domestic government."

"And suppose she *won't* ride behind," said Horace, opening a bottle of soda-water.

"You can't change places at a gallop," answered Uncle John. "Jump on first, and keep the horse going so fast, that she has enough to do by winding her arms round your waist not to fall off into the mire. What I mean, in plain English, is this: take the initiative on every question of importance, as a matter of course. Leave to a wife so much of its details, that she has no leisure to dispute

your plan. It is hopeless to make her understand a theory, but in practice she is more than your equal. Occupation is the one panacea for nervous temperaments—witness, the feminine tendency to needle-work. An idle woman is invariably a discontented one, and a wife's discontent from whatever cause it springs, she attributes to her husband's fault. There are very few ladies who would be ill, and fewer still who would be cross, if they got up at six every morning to black the grates!"

"I should hate them with dirty hands, too," laughed Horace, thinking, it must be confessed, of Annie Dennison's taper fingers and rosy little palms. "After all, I'm not sure that it isn't a woman's first duty to be good-looking, even if she is good-for-nothing."

"You don't think so," replied his host. "Men say these things, but each has a pattern treasured up in his own heart that is good, good-looking, devoted to himself, and altogether an impossible piece of perfection. He seeks it all his life, and in every out-of-the-way corner. He will marry over and over again

without finding it, yet never despair of its existence. What do you suppose is the moral of Blue Beard?"

"I never knew he had a moral," answered Horace. "I have always considered him a man of extraordinary enterprise, classing him with the people who discover new continents, and want to know where the Nile comes from. If it's not an *immoral* moral, I don't mind hearing it."

"The moral of Blue Beard, I take it, is this," observed Uncle John with perfect gravity: "that one wife is just as tiresome as another wife; that you may change over and over again without the faintest improvement, and that a wise man will stick to his first venture as the Prayer Book enjoins, 'for better or worse.'"

"Then you *are* an advocate for matrimony after all!" exclaimed Horace, throwing his cigar into the grate.

"Under considerable restrictions, yes," replied his host. "If it is taken in hand like any other matter of business, with common

caution, I do not myself see why in the average of cases it should not turn out fairly well. But if a man is to shut both eyes tight, and then dash headlong into one of the most delicate and difficult negotiations of life, I cannot understand upon what principle he expects everything to turn out in his favour, nor what right he has to blame anything but his own folly when he finds himself in a mess from which there is no extrication. If you buy a farm, you have it surveyed by a responsible land agent—a yacht, you take care that it shall be examined by somebody who understands yachts—a horse, he must be passed by a veterinary surgeon before he goes into your stable. You don't engage a cook without satisfactory references, and you grudge no trouble to become acquainted with the antecedents, temper, and disposition of a governess for your children. But when it is a question of a wife for yourself, you take no pains, you make no inquiries ; you get a ticket, at the merest hap-hazard, for a lottery in which there are confessedly a superfluity of blanks, and

think yourself entitled to complain for the rest of your life that you haven't drawn a prize."

"Women run the same risk," said Horace. "That's a comfort, at any rate. It's as fair for one as the other."

"I'm not clear that they *do* run the same risk," replied Uncle John, "They are far keener-sighted than ourselves. They tell each other many secrets about men that we should be surprised to find them acquainted with, and each knows exactly how far to trust her informant. In the London world I am disposed to believe the chaperons have an organised system of police, with a secret-intelligence department attached; but you ought to know more of these things than I do. That is not the question at present. You asked me if I considered women a mistake. I answer, No. A necessary evil, perhaps, like one's liver and one's conscience. But a mistake—certainly not."

"I am glad to hear it," answered Horace, laughing, "and I value your opinion very much, Mr. Dennison, for I am sure you have had a great deal of experience."

In Uncle John's grim smile there lurked a sad affirmative. Rising from his easy chair he placed himself with his back to the fire, as if about to commence an oration, but seemed to think better of it, and lit his candle instead.

"Experience does *not* make fools wise," said he. "Most proverbs are fallacious. None greater than that which says it does. Goodnight, Maxwell. I hope your room is comfortable. Breakfast as usual—a liberal half-past nine."

The guest was familiar enough with the ways of the house to know that a "liberal half-past nine" meant a punctual ten o'clock, and determined that for once in his life he would be in time. Amongst certain manly qualities he believed he possessed, there was none of which Horace prided himself more than decision of character.

"Other fellows," he would say, "half the men we know, go talking a thing backwards and forwards, till they lose the real bearings of the case. They swing the ship to verify her

compasses till they don't know north from south, and whether they are standing on their heads or their heels. Even if they see an opening they make for it too late, perhaps turn back to look for another, and only come to a decision in time to find both closed. That's not my way. I may do wrong, but I do it *at once.* I make up my mind, and go in without hesitating for a win. If I fail, better luck next time; but, at least, I never shrink from a shy for fear of losing my stick!"

With such sentiments it is perhaps unnecessary to observe that Mr. Maxwell found himself in a very uncomfortable and vacillating state of mind when he dressed for his "liberal half-past nine" o'clock breakfast at Plumpton Priors. Had his hand been no steadier than his intentions, he must have cut himself repeatedly while shaving, and his letters from London only served to render him more uncertain as to the course he should pursue. A large official envelope contained a communication from the Foreign Office, that would afford an excellent pretext for returning by the mid-

day train; but his diplomatic experience also informed him it might stand over unnoticed for the next two days, without the slightest detriment to the interests of Her Majesty. If he had been really obliged to curtail his visit at short notice he would have grumbled loudly no doubt, while acknowledging, nevertheless, a certain sensation of relief; whereas, had there been no post at all, he could have waited, as a matter of course, without any feeling of shame, to see what turn his affairs might take. Now he had it in his power to do exactly as he pleased, and what to do, for the life of him, he could not decide. It was evident that Annie Dennison had imbibed a strong interest in his friend, even if her affections were not already inextricably involved. At the same time he could not but be conscious that in her manner to himself there lurked a something that was as far removed from indifference as it was indeed from common politeness; a something of shyness and irritation that was equivalent to dislike, and yet not the same as dislike either.

Our man of action came down to breakfast at five minutes before ten, more puzzled than he had ever been in his life.

He found two servants waiting, and no one else in the room.

"Anybody breakfasted?" he asked the butler, who offered him grill.

Nobody but Miss Dennison, sir," answered that official. "Mr. Mortimer takes breakfast in the blue drawing-room, and Miss Dennison got hers early and is gone to make tea for him."

"No grill, thank you!" thundered Horace in a voice that startled the demure footman who attended on his chief's steps with hot plates.

"Tea?"

"No."

"Coffee?"

"Either—neither—that'll do. I say, tell my servant I shall be obliged to leave by the 12.10 train. He must order a fly from the village at once. If Mr. Dennison does not come down before I start, make my compliments. Say I have been sent for back to London and will write by to-night's post."

Then Horace finished his breakfast in a violent hurry, and found he did not know what to do with the time he had to spare.

He went back to his bedroom. His servant was packing, in a thorough-draught, with the new housemaid, who had thrown door and windows open, and obviously been "making hay" in the room, on her knees at the fire-place. He sought the library, and wondered how it could look so cheerless and uncomfortable. The blue drawing-room he resolved not to approach. Of course he found his grasp on the handle of the door. It would seem so unkind to go away without wishing Percy Mortimer good-bye.

With such loyal sentiments in the ascendant, it was strange he should have felt so keen a thrill of disappointment to discover that gentleman alone.

"Holloa, Maxwell!" exclaimed his friend, who, with the remains of a choice little breakfast on a spider-legged table drawn to his sofa looked the picture of comfort, "why out of bed in the middle of the night? I thought

when there was no hunting you never came down till luncheon."

"Obliged to go back to the mill," replied Maxwell, with a preoccupied air, and ears on the alert for the rustle of a dress. "Letter from the F. O. just arrived. Ought never to have come away."

"I always thought our foreign policy fatuous in the extreme," observed his friend; "but it must be very shaky indeed if it can't stand alone without your assistance for twenty-four hours. What's happened? Is Prester John coming over for the Derby? Hang it, Horace, you'll have to take him to Cremorne?"

"I didn't come to chaff," answered Maxwell, rather sulkily. "I came to wish you good-bye, and to ask if I could do anything for you in London?"

"Yes, you can, fifty things," said the invalid. "In the first place I want some more books from Hookham's. I'll make you out a list in five seconds. Then I must have a pair of crutches sent down, and tell the fellow not to pad them too much under the arms. And, let

me see, when you *are* in Pall Mall, you wouldn't mind calling at my lodgings and telling the people. You're not listening, old fellow. What is it?"

Maxwell's attention was obviously engrossed elsewhere. He could see what Mortimer could *not* see—Annie Dennison's hat bobbing up and down amongst the cedars outside.

"All right," he answered; "I won't forget. You shall have the padded books, and the new crutches, and everything down by to-morrow's post. Good-bye, old fellow, I mustn't stay another minute. I shall be late for my train."

In half-a-dozen steps he was out of the house and alongside of Annie on the terrace walk, beneath the cedars.

"Going, Mr. Maxwell?" said that young lady, with provoking good humour, as he proffered rather an incoherent adieu. "You have paid us a very shabby visit this time."

He muttered something about business—public office—press of work—man's time not

his own—ending by a marked, "wanted *there* at any rate!"

"Meaning to imply you're not wanted *here*," said Annie, with some temper. "If you think so you're quite right to go."

"Am I?" he asked humbly, and in rather quavering accents.

"*You* know best," replied Miss Annie. "*I* can only say we shall all be disappointed at losing you so soon. We hoped you would have staid till Mr. Mortimer was off the sofa."

"Mr. Mortimer—always Mr. Mortimer," thought Horace. "I wish I had broke my leg instead of Percy. Perhaps it would have been Mr. Maxwell then. Well, there's nothing for it now but to be off. Here's the fly packed and everything. Good-bye, Miss Dennison," he added, in an audible voice, and proffering his hand.

"Good-bye," she repeated, giving him her own, ungloved.

He held it just long enough to convey something more than conventional civility in

the expression of his hope that they might meet in London.

She could afford to laugh, for she knew she was winning.

"People cannot help meeting in London," she answered gaily: adding, as she disappeared into the house, "I hope you don't run away from your friends in London as you do in the country!"

He couldn't make her out. All the way to the station the girl puzzled him, and so puzzling him wove the fatal web, with its imperceptible meshes, closer and closer about his heart.

END OF VOL. I.

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